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WIND RIVER CLARK,

THE GOLD HERMIT. BY LEON LEWIS.



THE SHOSHONE EXTENDED HIS HAND AND CAUGHT HER BY THE ARM, WITH A MALIGNANT CHUCKLE.

CHAPTER I. ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

In a lone, wild region of Wyoming Territory, just as a glorious summer day was dawning, a man of strange and striking aspect reached the crest of an

elevation which enabled him to overlook the woods and waters for many a mile around him, and came to a halt.

In his hand he carried a powerful reconnoitering glass, of that sort habitually used by officers.

"I cannot guard my precious secrets

too well," he ejaculated, with an earnestness and preoccupation which caused him to speak aloud without being conscious of doing so. "Those tracks I saw yesterday—that smoke and those embers of the day before, with those footprints—are unmistakable hints that

my Eden will some day be invaded. We are already in danger. I must be wary and watchful."

He drew his breath hard and deep as he adjusted his glass and raised it to his eye, bending a long and sweeping survey upon his surroundings.

And what a magnificent scene was that the lone watcher had under his gaze!

To the westward lay the towering peaks of the Wind River Mountains; to the north the great bald spur which juts out between Sage Creek and the South Fork; to the south the snow-clad crests of the great Atlantic Peak; and to the east the vast wildernesses of rock and wood which still lie unknown and unexplored in the midst of the Wind River Valley.

"I see nothing suspicious," he declared, lowering his glass, after a careful inspection of the landscape in every direction. "That party of hunters has evidently returned to the fort. The man I believed to be a prospector gives no further sign of his presence, and I may hope he has gone his ways never to return. That young white woman of whom I caught a glimpse Tuesday has doubtless found her way out of these solitudes, as was suggested by the direction in which she was going. I see no sign of any new intruder. For the present I may be hopeful. For another day at least we appear to be safe."

Turning abruptly, he strode away with a mien which attested that he had in view some particular destination, and that he was anxious to reach it as soon as possible.

Even in a region where curious types of men are the rule rather than the exception, this man would have commanded especial attention.

Slender and even slight of frame, he was nevertheless as muscular as a tiger.

His eyes were singularly keen, and took note of even the slightest features of his surroundings without apparent effort.

Bearded and grizzled, with hair which fell to his shoulders, his general aspect suggested a man rather past the prime of life, notwithstanding the ease and vigor of his movements.

He was clad wholly in the skins of wild animals, and was armed with a rifle and a pair of revolvers—the latter stuck in a belt at his waist, and the former slung across his shoulders.

What manner of man was he?

It could have been seen at a glance.

He was a recluse or hermit who had fled, years before, from the great world of strife and heartlessness which had given him some terrible shock—of just what nature we need not pause here to inquire.

He was also a hunter and trapper, as any man in such a situation must have been, if only for the sake of self-defense, sustenance, clothing and bedding.

What else he was will be, in due course, apparent.

After a long and rapid march through the woods and opens, he reached the brow of a short and rocky foot-hill, from which he could look down into a little dell that had been converted into a rustic Eden.

Here this strange man had his home.

In the center of an open space containing a couple of acres was a rude but comfortable cabin of a single story; a log stable, with room for two horses; a shed for a cow; a murmuring torrent, with water enough to have quenched the thirst of an army; a garden in which grew every sort of vegetable of the commoner kinds, and patches of lawn which were dotted with many a group of trees and shrubs.

A single glance would have sufficed to tell an observer that the occupant of this abode was an artist as well as a toiler, and that all the features it presented had been elaborated with as much taste as patience.

Halting at the point we have indicated, the hermit contemplated the scene before him a few moments with kindling eyes, and then a troubled and anxious expression appeared on his countenance.

"Ah! if some wolf should steal into this fold!" he sighed, while his eyes grew moist, and a tremor of pain shook his frame. "And I feel that such will be the case! Something tells me that these long years of peace and security are drawing to a close, and that a new order of things is coming. My secret will soon cease to be one. Others will discover that these hills and valleys are full of gold, and all sorts of men, red and white, will hasten here and battle for its possession! I shall have to turn night into day henceforth, the better to watch my treasures. There is trouble at hand!"

CHAPTER II.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE concluding words of the hermit were still on his lips, when a door of the mountain cabin was drawn open briskly, and a slight, graceful figure flashed out into the sunlight.

It was that of a curly-haired, sweet-faced girl of fifteen or sixteen years, who was clad in a plain white gown, which was belted in at the waist with scarlet leather and bronze buckles, and whose every movement and action seemed almost ethereal in their ease and beauty.

"Where are you, Papa Clark?" she called,

after a swift glance of inquiry around her, in a voice which seemed to the hearer the most exquisite of music. "Are you coming, papa? Breakfast is ready!"

The hermit had only to change his position two or three steps to emerge into the view of his daughter from the eclipse in which he had been held by a group of bushes.

"Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed, with a look of relief, as she ran to meet him. "I heard you slipping away before daylight as silently as possible lest you should waken me. Where have you been?"

"Only to the Lookout, as usual."

He drew her to his heart, smoothing back the curls from her noble forehead, and pressing a kiss of infinite tenderness and respect upon it.

"But you have been gone a long time, dear papa!"

"That's because I've taken quite a turn, Nettie, to assure myself that there are no intruders near us," explained the father, as the couple moved toward the cottage.

"You look anxious, too! Have you seen any more indications that we may soon have neighbors?"

"Nothing to speak of," answered the hermit, who naturally shrunk from entering into the details of his disquiet and gathering apprehensions.

"No smoke? No trail of hunters?"

"No, my daughter."

The maiden drew a sigh of relief.

"I am so glad for your sake, dear papa," she murmured, as she clung to him with childish yearning and confidence. "And for my own sake, too, because you will not need to be absent so often and so long upon these watchful turns around us. And, after all, what is there to fear, papa?"

"Perhaps there's nothing to really fear, Nettie," returned the hermit, "but I begin to see that we cannot hope to remain much longer the sole possessors of these solitudes."

He paused a little abruptly, as if afraid of clouding the bright, sunny face at his side, and the couple gained the house in silence.

Yet more than once did the father sigh inaudibly, as he marked anew the rare, strange loveliness of his child, and realized how perilous was such beauty in such a situation!

The interior of the cottage was even more indicative of taste, order, neatness, and comfort, than the exterior, as was natural, the former being Nettie's especial domain, and one in which she had toiled diligently, carrying into effect those ideas of home which had within a few years crowded so naturally upon her.

The dining-table, with its white damask and glistening china; the pantry, with its orderly rows of supplies and dishes; the two adjoining bedrooms, with their snow-white sheets and counterpanes; the principal or living-room, with its polished floor—in a word, all the features of this abode, attested that Nettie was already a model housekeeper, and that her one idea was to minister to the comfort and happiness of her father.

A handsome case at one end of the room was full of charming books, including the great masters in almost every field of literature and science.

"You ought to have a good appetite, I am sure, after such a stroll in the fresh morning air," said Nettie, as she proceeded to dish up the breakfast, "and you will see that I have taken care not to put you on short allowance."

By the time Mr. Clark had washed his hands and face, and passed a brush over his hair and beard, Nettie was in her accustomed place at the head of the table, as radiant and sunny as the morning itself, which had begun to illuminate the entire interior of the dwelling with its glories.

"What a beautiful day!" exclaimed the father, as he took his seat at the table. "If you think you can spare me, Nettie, I'll make another and final trip to the fort to-day, to procure those necessities of which we were speaking."

"As you think best, papa," replied the maiden, with a barely audible sigh, as she handed her father a cup of coffee.

"The truth is," added Mr. Clark, as he proceeded to help his daughter to the substantial of the breakfast, "the horses really need such a turn to keep them in good condition. As I have so often told you, I wish to keep them on edge, or in readiness to go for their lives at a moment's warning!"

"There you are again, papa!—constantly coming back to the idea that we are in peril!" cried Nettie, looking at him half-reproachfully.

"You seem, within a day or two, to have a great deal of trouble on your mind, and to be as nervous as a woman."

"Well, well, I must try and do better," returned the father, with a smile which ill-concealed his uneasiness. "Perhaps I shall feel less nervous after I have laid in a good supply of ammunition for my rifle and revolvers."

The maiden started, as if she deemed this remark even more disquieting than her father's nervousness.

"I see that you are keeping something from

me," she exclaimed, shaking her head playfully at him. "One would say that you have seen a band of robbers in the adjacent hills and woods, and that you are expecting them from one moment to another to make an attack upon us!"

"Oh, nothing of the sort, Nettie!"

The conversation ceased at this point, however, and all the more readily because Nettie soon became absorbed in some unwonted pre-occupations of her own, and the repast was completed in silence.

CHAPTER III.

A THREATENING PRESENCE.

AFTER breakfast the hermit and Nettie went out to the little stable adjoining the house to give due attention to their horses—a pair of fine young bays.

"What noble fellows they are!" exclaimed the maiden, as she patted the arched neck of the one she was in the habit of riding. "I admire and love them more and more every day, papa."

"And with reason, Nettie," returned the hermit. "We see so little of human beings that our dumb animals take the place of friends. How long has it been since you saw any other fellow-creature than myself?"

"Why, it must be years, papa. So long, in fact, that I cannot recall the time and place of such meeting."

"And that was all very well when I brought you here as a little girl," added the hermit, thoughtfully. "But is such a state of things still satisfactory to you?"

The maiden hesitated a moment about replying.

She was conscious that the vistas of her soul were no longer bounded by the horizon of her daily life; but she had heard and read so much of the evils and miseries of the great world beyond that she hardly knew whether she was drawn toward it or repulsed from it.

"Why shouldn't it be?" she demanded. "What more do I want than my own dear papa? What other friend can I have, seeing that my poor, dear mother has so long been an angel in Heaven?"

The hermit looked serious, as if some thought of a possible lover and husband obtruded itself upon his mind, but he evidently did not care to speak of it or linger upon it.

Instead, he laid off his coat—for the day was now getting warm—and set about grooming the horses in a style that would have pleased the most exacting of trainers.

Seating herself in a rustic chair near him, Nettie watched the process in pleased restfulness, while seeming to muse more or less seriously upon various facts and problems of her own and her father's situation.

For a few minutes both were so busy—he with the task he had undertaken and she with her thoughts—that they gave very little attention to their surroundings.

During this interval, an intruder, who had surveyed the premises stealthily during the father's absence, and had since been watching the couple, crept toward them, under cover of the adjacent rocks and bushes, until he was near enough to see them distinctly and listen to their conversation.

This intruder was an Indian.

What a picture he presented with his black eyes staring and his ear inclined in listening!

His long, black hair was coarse and straight; his cheek-bones high and salient; his jaws massive as those of a bull-dog, and his garb of that composite, scare-crow cast which distinguishes all red-men who exchange their native freedom for the absurd incasements of their conquerors.

To complete the ill-favor of his aspect, he had been engaged in a fierce combat, which had left him terribly disfigured.

There were cuts and bruises on his head and face, and in his left cheek was a deep laceration.

He was unarmed, as far as could be seen, but the most desperate men do not parade their weapons, and such a herculean man as this would have been a dangerous assailant, if armed merely with a stick or a stone.

In his eyes was that intense, restless look which indicates hunger or other sharp physical suffering.

"There! They now begin to look like it!" at length exclaimed the hermit, as he stepped back a few paces to admire the glossy coats he had been polishing. "All they need is such a going over as this every day, and you would soon be able to see your face in their jackets!" He sat down in the doorway of the little stable, and resumed:

"To come back to the subject of which I was speaking yesterday, Nettie, I am satisfied that this whole region, for scores of miles around us, is one of the richest GOLD PLACERS on this continent. In confirmation of this opinion, it is enough to say that I have found gold-dust and nuggets in very paying quantities in hundreds of places!"

"You have, papa?" cried Nellie, in joyful surprise. "Why, how still you have kept about it!"

"Yes, my child. I wanted to be sure of my

find before saying anything about it, and I also wanted to surprise you."

The listening Indian's attention had redoubled at this mention of gold, and he had not hesitated to creep a step or two nearer.

"In fact, the immense quantities of gold I have already found," pursued the hermit, "is in itself a proof that the field around us is practically inexhaustible."

"But how much have you found, papa?"

"Enough, certainly," and the hermit smiled gravely, "to make you the center of many eyes when you go out into the world as your father's heiress. You have long wondered what kept me so busy in the hills, and I have told you that you should know all in due time, and now you must know that I have been gathering gold, and that I have a great deal of it concealed within a few rods of us at this moment. Would you like to see some of it?"

"Most assuredly, if you are not obliged to dig it up, or be at some great trouble to produce it!" replied Nellie, with wondering eagerness.

"Oh, I can show it to you as well as not," declared the hermit, with a joy he did not seek to conceal. "But where do you think it's hidden?"

"It's certainly not in the house," replied Nellie smilingly, "for it would have soon fallen under my notice."

"No it's not in the house, for forty good reasons," avowed the hermit, "one of which is that the house would be one of the first places to be searched by an enemy or an intruder."

"Then where is it, papa?"

"I will show you."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TREASURES IN DANGER.

THE hermit arose and led the way to a large raised flower-bed in the center of the garden—one of several on the premises—which occupied the limited space between the cottage and the stable.

In the center of this flower-bed stood a small octagon pavilion, with a solid floor, latticed sides, and rustic seats, and with a circular walk around it which was reached by a number of approaches.

"Here it is," announced Mr. Clark.

Nettie looked around eagerly, but saw no sign of a hiding-place.

Smiling at her puzzled look, the hermit touched a secret spring at one side of the pavilion, when the three or four steps by which it was entered fell outward and downward, disclosing the top of a narrow staircase.

"It's somewhat dark, as well as a little cramped," remarked the hermit, as he produced a wax taper and lighted it, "but I think you'll have no trouble in following me, seeing that you are not attired like a lady of fashion."

Nettie peered into the opening thus presented to her view.

"Why, I had no suspicion of the existence of any such place," she murmured. "When did you build it?"

"Oh, a few months since, and chiefly when you were abed and asleep. As you see, it's quite roomy. Let me show you the way."

He suited his action to the word, and Nettie followed him, descending a flight of eight or ten steps.

"This is my storehouse," resumed the hermit, flashing his light over a space some eight feet square which had been excavated under the pavilion, and which contained a great number and variety of ordinary merchandise boxes, "and here is my treasure!"

"In these boxes, papa?"

"Yes. The parcels in these boxes all contain gold-dust and nuggets, or such high grade ore that it may justly be classed as bullion!"

He proceeded to show the maiden samples of his findings, and the sight forced many an ejaculation of wonder and admiration from her.

"How much is there in all?" she at length asked.

"Enough to easily cover half a million of dollars!"

For a few moments Nettie appeared stupefied with amazement.

"And you have found the most of it within a few months, or since you built this pavilion?" she queried.

"Yes, Nettie."

"Such, then, is the secret of those mysterious absences which have puzzled me—when you seemed to be hunting, I mean, and didn't bring in any game! But here is a lot of gold coins and greenbacks, papa," she added, as she raised the lid of one of the boxes near her. "What does this mean?"

"This money, my child," explained the hermit, "is the proceeds of the gold I have recently sold to Mr. Lippman, the sutler at Fort Washakie, amounting to some seventy thousand dollars!"

"Ah! this accounts for the numerous trips you have lately made to the fort!" exclaimed Nettie. "What a pile of money! And how easy for any one to carry it off if its whereabouts should be discovered!"

"Oh, there is little danger that any one will look for a hiding-place under this pavilion!" re-

turned the hermit. "Besides, I've only left it here temporarily. I thought you would be able to make some suggestions in regard to its safe-keeping."

"That's easily done, papa!" declared Nettie. "I can show you a place where no one would ever think of looking for it. Do you intend to sell more nuggets to Mr. Lippman?"

"To some extent, perhaps," replied the hermit, "but I must say that I am not quite satisfied with him. He seemed very anxious to find out where the gold comes from, and asked me a great many questions I did not care to answer. Another thing, he makes me sacrifice five or six per cent. of the value of my gold for ready money, and I have grounds for thinking that he may try to track me to my mine, or hire some cut-throat to follow me to it, with a view to my further spoliation or total suppression. For these and other reasons, I shall endeavor to dispose of my findings in some other quarter—probably through one of the banks in Wyoming City."

"That would be better, papa," said Nettie, "than to attract too much attention at the fort or in this vicinity. But, what's that?"

She started violently, turning a startled glance toward the entrance of the staircase.

"What did you see—or hear?" asked the hermit, as his glances took the same direction.

"I thought," explained Nettie, "that I heard a deep breathing, as of some wild animal."

The hermit smiled reassuringly.

"There are no wild animals within many miles of us," he declared. "My rifle has been too busy during the last few years for them to have the least chance."

While speaking, he led the way up the stairs.

What Nettie had heard was of course the breathing of the mysterious Indian, as he peered into the staircase with his senses excited to a state not far removed from delirium.

That he had listened to the confidences exchanged by the father and daughter, would not have been doubted for a moment by any one who could have caught even a glimpse of his features.

Not only had he overheard this conversation, but he understood it.

He realized that the country around him was a PLACER, and that the old hermit was thus far the only possessor of the secret.

He comprehended, too, not merely the vastness of the sum Mr. Clark had already discovered, but also the value of the ready cash he had seen Nettie handling.

And knowing these things and comprehending them, what a road was open to his villainy! How easy to turn these discoveries to account!

If he could get rid of the hermit, Nettie and the hidden treasure would remain at his mercy!

The maiden's inquiry had afforded the intruder ample warning, and it was easy for him to return to his covert near the stable before the father and daughter emerged from the hiding-place of their fortune and made all secure behind them.

A brief survey of the premises did not render them the wiser, and the intruder, with the craft habitual to his race, had no difficulty in changing his whereabouts often enough and sufficiently to escape detection.

"I see no signs of any animal," remarked the hermit, after a keen survey of the flower-beds. "What you heard may have been an echo of our own breathing, or a mere nervous fancy."

He led the way to the house, seating himself in a cool and shaded nook of the vine-clad veranda, with Nettie beside him.

"I'll start for the fort in another hour, or at eight o'clock," he resumed, glancing at his watch. "That is, if you are still inclined to be a brave little girl, and not fret and worry too much in my absence. It is, of course, out of the question for me to take you with me. Not for worlds would I have you seen by the lawless and dangerous men who are always hanging about a frontier fort."

"I comprehend all that, papa," said Nettie, suppressing the regrets she felt at the hermit's proposed absence. "I know that you would adjourn this trip indefinitely if I were to express the least desire to that effect, but I will not be so selfish and timid. Besides, with such resources as you have placed at my disposal, and she smiled with rare self-confidence, "it would be no easy matter for the most daring intruder to make me trouble!"

"There speaks my own brave and devoted daughter," exclaimed the hermit, as he stroked her hand caressingly. "But this is the very last time I shall put your courage to the test. I have made a list of all the little essentials we shall require for a number of months, and by the end of that time there will doubtless be some great change in our situation and surroundings."

The hermit mused a few moments in silence and then continued:

"You are now such a great girl, Nettie, that

I must soon have a serious talk with you in regard to our future. You have more than once asked me why I became a hermit, and it's about time that you had a candid answer."

Nettie thanked him with a smile, nestling against his breast, but she did not ask him any questions. She comprehended that the things she desired to know could not be told in a casual interview and that she would know all in due season.

At the end of an hour the hermit led the way to the stable, carrying under his arm a buckskin sack containing the gold-dust and nuggets he intended to exchange for ready money.

It had been his practice to ride one of his horses and let the other follow him, so as to have a relay constantly at hand, at every point of these trips, but he now led out only one of them.

"It seems more like leaving you alone to take both, Nettie," he remarked, as he encountered her questioning glance. "I shall feel, if I leave Ned here, that he is a sort of company and protection for you."

Nettie expressed her thanks for this thoughtfulness, and then the hermit, leading both horses from the shed, saddled one and mounted and rode away at such an easy and careful pace that any thoughtful observer would have understood that he was starting on a long journey.

The maiden watched him out of sight, waving him a final greeting as he vanished, and then gathered a handful of fresh, tender grass and stood beside her favorite while he ate it, talking to him and caressing him.

A step at her side startled her, and she turned to find herself face to face with the hideous Indian who had so long been watching her and her father.

CHAPTER V.

THE "CIVILIZED" SAVAGE IN POSSESSION.

AT the very instant when Nettie Clark detected the presence of the terrible intruder, he extended his hand and caught her by the arm, with a malignant chuckle.

"Your father is out of the way," he exclaimed, as he nodded in the direction the hermit had taken. "It's a long ride to the fort. He'll not be back until late to-night. We shall have ample time to get acquainted in his absence!"

The words gave Nettie a clew.

The intruder was not only a Shoshone, or one of the Indians who belong on the Reservation, but he had enjoyed the advantages of an attempt at education, as education is understood by the wandering missionaries upon our frontier.

In other terms, he had been "educated" to the extent in which about one in a million of his people is nowadays favored.

He could converse in a fairly intelligent manner, and acquired about all the vices and villainies our so-called "civilization" can suggest or furnish.

"You speak English?" was the first remark of Nettie, as she gently strove to withdraw her arm from his clutch.

"As you have heard."

"You are a Shoshone?"

The red-skin nodded, while his coarse smile deepened.

"I see you have been instructed by some of our missionaries," pursued Nettie, "by Father Camp, I presume?"

"Yes, by Father Camp."

"Then of course you have no excuse for being rude to me," intimated the maiden, forcing a smile. "Will you let go of my arm?"

"Not just yet," and his black eyes turned still more admiringly upon her, while his grasp tightened upon her arm. "Permit me to ask you a few questions. What is your name?"

"Nettie Clark."

"Mine is Horatio Campus," returned the smiling reprobate, "and it is needless to say that I am indebted for it to the reverend missionary you have mentioned. I was simply known before that as The-pappoose-with-the-big-ears. Is your father Wind River Clark?"

Nettie assented, with a gathering terror.

The very fact that Campus was one of the pupils of the missionaries added immensely to the apprehensions he inspired, inasmuch as all the intelligence these "educated" savages can acquire is generally carried to the account of their native baseness.

"Will you let go of me, Campus?" she pleaded.

"You are hurting me!"

"I'll see about it. Are you armed?"

Nettie hesitated a moment, then nodded affirmatively.

"What with?"

"With a revolver."

"So am I."

He whipped out his weapon and cocked it, thrusting it within six inches of her face.

"Let's see yours," he added.

"Oh, never mind, Campus—"

"Let me see it, I say, or I will take it from you!"

Nettie drew her revolver from her pocket, holding it up to his view.

It was of fair dimensions and fully loaded.

"Why, it's almost a counterpart of mine!" exclaimed the Shoshone, after examining the weapon with the eye of a critic. "Who gave it to you?"

"My father."

"What do you carry it for?"

"For my protection."

"Then your motives are not the same as mine, Nettie, for I carry mine to worry my neighbors. Can you fire it?"

"Certainly."

"Let me see you do so. In fact, let's have a little shooting-match."

How mocking and terrible he was!

What delight he seemed to take in the torture of his victim, whom he still clutched by the arm!

"You see yon tree?" he asked, indicating a small solitary pine which stood about two rods distant. "Do you think you can hit it?"

"I ought to. Papa thinks I am a very good shot."

"Then let me see what you can do. Or shall I set you an example?"

He raised his revolver and fired with such suddenness as to give her a start.

"Go and see what I've done," he enjoined, smilingly. "You'll find the bullet in the center of that knot where the lowest limb on this side has been cut off!"

As he released the girl's arm at this moment, she thought it might conciliate him to comply with his injunction.

She accordingly walked to the tree and looked or the bullet at the spot indicated.

"Sure enough!" she announced. "It's just where you stated."

"You see by that what I can do," he cried, as his wicked smile deepened. "Now, come back here, and let me have a sample of what you can do in the same line!"

For the reasons already indicated, Nettie took all this badgering in good part, and quietly returned to her first position, and discharged her revolver at the knot which had been the aim of her tormentor.

"That never'll do!" exclaimed Campus, having marked her nervous and unsteady aim. "You haven't even hit the tree!"

Such proved to be the case.

"Shall we continue?" asked the red-skin, as he noted with malicious smiles the increasing pallor of Nettie's features.

The maiden shook her head.

"You don't care to practice any more with me?"

"No. I'm not at my best, I think!"

"I should think not," sneered Campus. "You must see by this time how foolish it was of your papa to give you such a toy for your protection. Of what use is a revolver to you?"

"I don't know as it's of any," answered poor Nettie, desperately.

"Then why not give it to me?"

"Would you like it?"

"Of course I would, since it's almost a match for the one I have, and would give me a very neat pair!"

"Then take it!" exclaimed Nettie, realizing that Campus would not have her a whit more at his mercy with two revolvers than with one, and hoping that the act would have a mollifying influence upon him.

"Ah, a thousand thanks!" cried the red-skin, with exaggerated politeness, as he thrust both weapons into a pocket on his right hip. "You are a nice little girl, and I shall esteem your present greatly. Do you think you can run as fast as I can?"

"Certainly not."

"Would you like to try me a hundred yards?"

Nettie shook her head wearily.

"You'd have a poor show, I am afraid," said Campus, smilingly. "I've often beaten the best of our Indian ponies a hundred yards. But that need not prevent you from giving me a trial. I can see that you are afraid of me, and that you would very much like to get out of my company. If you choose, I'll give you a start of a hundred yards, and you may make your escape from me if you can!"

"I—I do not wish to make any such attempt, Campus!" declared Nettie, with a sigh.

"And why not?"

"Because it would be useless!"

"You are a sensible girl," declared the red-skin, laughingly. "You realize that you have no chance with me with your revolver, and that you are not fleet enough of foot to run away from me. Is not this about the size of it?"

"It is, Campus!"

"Then there's only one more point to guard," pursued the Shoshone, "and that is the magnificent horse in the stall yonder. If you could mount him at some moment when my back is turned, and secure a hundred yards the start, you'd be able to give me the slip!"

The maiden sighed again at the mere thought of such a leave-taking.

"But you may be sure that I will not give you the chance," pursued the smiling miscreant. "This way, please!"

He led the way to the little stable and brought out the handsome bay.

"You are not going to hurt him!" cried Net-

tie, anxiously, startled by the sinister look on the Indian's face.

"Oh no! I'll merely snap on him a patent steel hopple which cannot be removed without the key, and which will prevent him from moving a mile an hour!"

He suited his action to the word, and Nettie saw that she was quite at his mercy!

CHAPTER VI.

A MURDEROUS CONSPIRACY.

At Fort Washakie, which is situated just within the southern edge of the Shoshone Indian Reservation, in the valley of the Wind River, the little sutler of the post, Hank Lippman, sat behind the counter of his "store," about the middle of the afternoon, gazing intently at a slip of paper containing a column of figures he had just footed up.

And as he gazed his face grew redder and redder with excitement, and a gleam of almost murderous greed and envy caused his small black eyes to glisten like live coals, adding not a little to the repulsiveness of the countenance he had inherited.

"Yes, it's really so," he soliloquized, with a startled and wondering air, as he looked nervously around to assure himself that he was quite alone. "Within less than three months I have paid that man sixty-nine thousand four hundred and thirty-eight dollars for gold-dust and nuggets! This is almost at the rate of a quarter of a million yearly, or nearly a thousand dollars a day! Now, where does he get all that gold?"

The little Israelite—for Israelite he certainly was—knitted his brows in deep thought, losing himself temporarily to all his surroundings.

"He gets it within a day's journey of this post, I've no doubt," he soon mused aloud, answering his own question. "And either on Government land, to which one man has as much right as another, or on the Shoshone Reservation, where he has no right whatever. But where is this wonderful mine or placer? Oh! that I could discover his secret! It makes me sick to see this wretched hermit getting away with these piles of money! Can he not be tracked to his hiding-place? I'll certainly make the attempt!"

He was interrupted by a footstep which suddenly fell upon his bearing, causing him to start as violently as if he had been caught planning a murder.

Crushing nervously in his hand the slip containing the column of figures the sutler slipped from the high stool he had been occupying, and made a pretense of arranging sundry cans and bottles upon the counter before him.

The next instant he had under his gaze the person whose approach had been announced by his footsteps.

"Oh, it's you, Jeb?" cried the sutler, with a gratified air. "And all toggled out in new civilian clothes?" he added, as he scanned the suit of "ready-made" in which the new-comer was incased. "How is this, old fellow?"

"Oh, my time's out, and I've equipped myself to tackle the world upon a new basis," answered the discharged cavalryman, carelessly. "Let's have a bottle of beer."

The sutler handed out the article demanded, but not until after an instant of barely perceptible hesitation, the ex-cavalryman being already deeply indebted to him.

"You're out of the ranks, then?" was the next query of the sutler, as he proceeded to serve his customer.

The latter nodded over the top of his tumbler, as it reached his lips.

"Anything especial in view?"

"Hardly, unless I decide to enter a homestead," replied the customer, after quaffing a portion of his beer. "It's quite a temptation, you see, for a fellow to take this course, inasmuch as my three years in the army are deducted from the time I am required to live on my claim, and I had thought of taking this step, Mr. Lippman, in order to be able to pay you the hundred dollars more or less I owe you."

"Oh, never mind what you owe me, Jeb," returned the sutler, with a sudden change of mien, as he lifted a swinging leaf in his counter and came out from behind it. "If you really mean to keep out of the army and get on in the world, I can suggest a better course than for you to take up a homestead."

"Really?" and the ex-cavalryman sat down his tumbler with an air of keen interest.

"Yes, I can," and the manner of Lippman grew still more friendly and confidential, as he pushed a chair toward his visitor, inviting him by a gesture to be seated. "I will give you the tip in as few words as possible, as we're likely to be interrupted at any moment," and the sutler advanced a chair close to the ex-cavalryman's, taking possession of it. "You've often seen, no doubt, that old hermit who comes here occasionally to exchange pelts for a portion of his supplies?"

"Wind River Clark, you mean?" returned the ex-cavalryman. "Yes, I've often seen him, although I've never exchanged a word with him, for the reason that he's as silent as an oyster. But what about him?"

"Well, Wind River Clark has made within a few months a discovery of gold within a day's journey of us, and one of the greatest importance."

"How do you know that?" and the face of the ex-cavalryman flushed with increased interest.

"Simply from the fact that he has brought me large quantities of gold-dust and nuggets to ship to the bank in Wyoming, which will of course hand it over to the mint."

"Ah! this is why he has been coming here so often during the last few weeks?" cried the ex-cavalryman.

"Exactly."

"And the amount of his find is really important?"

"Very!" declared Lippman, sinking his voice to a whisper, and sending another questioning glance around him. "At first he brought only small quantities of the 'precious,' as if afraid of attracting attention, but he has lately blossomed out to a prodigy. Make a guess, Jeb, as to how much cash I've paid Clark within three months!"

"Oh, perhaps two thousand dollars."

The sutler smiled grimly, as he placed under the gaze of his neophyte the column of figures of which we have spoken.

"You don't mean it!" ejaculated the ex-cavalryman, as soon as he could find voice.

"It's as true as preaching," affirmed the sutler, moving nervously in his chair. "And to think that he's getting hold of nearly a thousand dollars a day, when he has no more right to it than any man in this garrison—no more right to it than you or I."

"It's too bad, I agree," returned the ex-cavalryman. "But, what can we do about it?"

"I will tell you."

The sutler looked searchingly around again, at the same time listening intently. Seeing and hearing nothing to suggest an intrusion, he hastily resumed, lowering his voice to a whisper:

"The thing to do is to watch this old hermit, when he comes here again and follow him to his retreat. We must dog the steps of that man until we know just where his hidden mine is situated."

The ex-cavalryman bowed understandingly, with the keenest attention.

"That'd be a nice thing to do, if it's within the limits of possibility," he declared.

"It not only can be done," pursued Lippman, "but you are the very man to do it. Not only what I've seen of you, during the last three years, but also what I've heard of you within a few months gives me the assurance that no better man than you are, Jeb Pinckney, can be had for this business."

"And if we could succeed in tracing Clark to his mine, what then, Mr. Lippman?"

"Why, the hermit must be suppressed, and you and I will be his heirs."

"Good!" commented Pinckney. "I see you know just what you are talking about. But, how can Clark be tracked to his hiding-place? He's as wary as a wolf. Nobody has any definite idea as to the direction from which he really comes. So far as I know, he always comes here in the afternoon, and no one has ever seen him ride away in company. He always rides to the north, when he leaves here, but his mine may be in the opposite direction. He always comes and goes as secretly as possible, but it would be as much as your life is worth to attempt to force your company upon him."

"I've thought of all that, Jeb," assured Lippman, "and of course have thought of a way of overcoming the difficulty. When Clark comes here again—and he may come any minute—I want you to watch your opportunity, while he's busy with me, and put a marked shoe on his horse—one that will cause the animal to leave a distinct and unmistakable trail, which can be distinguished and followed anywhere, even if it should be crossed by a thousand others!"

The eyes of Jeb Pinckney gleamed knowingly at the suggestion.

As one of the smiths of the post, he had become a proficient workman, and a dozen suggestions as to the proposed marking of the shoe instantly occurred to him.

"I see the point," he remarked, "and am quite ready and willing to join you in the proposed undertaking. To be of any use, however, I shall have to remain constantly on the watch here at your expense until the hermit shows up again."

"That's easily arranged," said Lippman, looking pleased. "You can figure as my clerk until our man puts in another appearance."

"Which won't be long," cried Pinckney, with a joyful start, as he looked from the door, "for yonder he comes!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARKED SHOE.

THE joy of Hank Lippman at this announcement was so great that he flushed scarlet.

"Sure enough," he muttered, as he also looked out. "Keep an eye on him, Jeb, and show him into my 'office' as soon as he arrives," and the sutler waved his hand toward a little back room,

into which he prepared to retreat, as was his wont when he had private transactions. "As soon as you see that he and I have settled down to our work, you will slip out, closing the store and taking the key with you, and attend to that shoeing. You comprehend, don't you?"

"Oh, perfectly."

"Of course I'll detain the hermit until you return and give me a hint that you have finished the job," added Lippman, hurriedly. "And it's needless to say that you are to accomplish this shoeing so secretly that no one will even suspect what you are doing."

Jeb nodded understandingly, and the sutler retired to his "office."

A few moments later, the hermit jogged up to the "store," hitched his horse under a little shed adjacent, and took his way into the presence of Jeb, whom he saluted with a careless nod, demanding:

"Is Mr. Lippman visible?"

"He is, sir," answered the ex-cavalryman, with involuntary deference. "Walk in, please."

He opened the door of the "office," inviting the visitor by a gesture to enter.

The hermit complied and Jeb closed the door, at the same time informing the sutler by a glance that the hermit's horse was now ready to receive due attention.

"Ah, Mr. Clark," exclaimed the treacherous sutler, as he arose briskly and advanced from his desk, offering his hand. "I am glad to see you again. I hope you are quite well, sir."

"The hope is reciprocated, Mr. Lippman," returned the hermit, with a singularly quiet and pleasant voice and mien, as he relinquished the hand of the sutler and sat down. "Are you quite at leisure for a little business?"

"Oh, yes—as usual," was the smiling response. "But perhaps I'd better turn the key in the lock," added the sutler, suiting the action to the word, "so that no one will intrude upon us. You have brought me more gold, I suppose?"

"A few pounds—yes, sir."

The hermit laid his buckskin sack across his knees and proceeded to open it, while the sutler resumed his seat behind his desk, upon which stood a pair of tall and finely-adjusted scales.

"The parties to whom I am shipping your gold, Mr. Clark," observed the sutler, "are beginning to wonder where it can all come from. They ask me in their latest letter if we've found a new Ophir."

"Their curiosity is only natural," returned the hermit, as he handed out a number of carefully enveloped nuggets. "Has it leaked out in your correspondence with them that your supplies are all received from one man?"

"It has, I'm sorry to say," admitted Lippman, as he set about examining and weighing the nuggets placed before him. "I ought to have been more guarded."

"Yes, you ought," said Clark, "as a mere matter of prudence, considering the importance of our recent transactions. In this sort of business, it's a mistake to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing!"

"I realized that at the start," avowed Lippman, "and have taken care to be very cautious. There's not a soul here, not even the commandant, who has any real conception of what we are doing. None of the soldiers and civilians hereabouts have received the least information from me."

"That is as it should be," commented the hermit. "If they have no knowledge of our affairs, they'll not be tempted to interfere with us, or to make an effort in that direction."

The sutler weighed and figured a few minutes in silence, and then continued:

"Of course it's a matter of self-interest for me to keep still and guard our secrets. So long as I can keep you to myself," and he smiled insinuatingly, "I shall not be compelled to share the profits of these transactions with another. But I nevertheless have many anxieties growing out of them. What if some of the robber gangs which are known to exist hereabouts were to hold you up? What if some of the Shoshone Indians—many of whom are only too sharp—should even guess what you are doing? What if two or three outlaws of almost any sort should combine to waylay you and rob you, as you come or go?"

"In any of these cases, the meddlers would see trouble, I reckon," answered the hermit, as a strange flash came into his steel-blue eyes.

"Oh, no doubt, sir—no doubt," assented Lippman, as he continued his proceedings. "But there is none the less a positive danger in your situation. What if your mine or placer should be discovered by another?"

"There's little danger of that, Mr. Lippman," returned the hermit, without a moment's hesitation or the slightest change of countenance.

"But still it's possible," insisted the sutler, "and in case of such a discovery you would be lucky to escape with your life. What a rush there'd be to the new field! What a reign of violence would be instantly inaugurated! All your rights would be swept away like a straw before a torrent, and all the cash I have paid you would be taken from you. You might even be deu up by the heels and whipped until you told the whereabouts of your treasure!"

The eyes of the hermit flashed again, but his

bearing did not otherwise express what effect the representations of the sutler had had upon him.

"All that seems rather problematical, Mr. Lippman," he contented himself with saying. "I am competent, I think, to take care of myself, and of my rights and interests. But to what was all this long preamble leading?"

"Why, I have been thinking that it would be wise for me to send for this gold instead of putting you to the risk and trouble of bringing it to me!"

The hermit smiled a little cynically.

"In other terms," he said, "you'd like me to share my secret with you?"

"Well, why not?" asked Lippman. "Am I not already sharing it to a very great extent, and daily running the risk of being murdered, by keeping on hand such large sums of money for you? But, if you don't want me to come to your abode—wherever that may be—why not select a place ten miles from here, on the Sage Creek, where we can meet on certain days, for the transaction of business?"

The hermit shook his head slowly.

"It will not be necessary," he assumed. "This is the last gold I expect to bring you."

"The last?" repeated Lippman, with a startled look. "Is your mine exhausted?"

"Whether it is or not, I have all the money I want at present."

The sutler continued to weigh and calculate, but his hand trembled with vexation.

"I have also run all the risks I care to take in this line," added Mr. Clark, "and have toiled till I am weary. I do not expect to be seen here again for many months, if ever."

The sutler heaved a profound sigh.

"Well, I am sorry to hear it," he declared. "I had hoped that we should continue these pleasant transactions for a long time to come."

In the silence that succeeded, the ring of an anvil fell upon the hearing of the little man and his visitor.

To the latter it was without meaning, but to Lippman it was a message full of significance.

He did not speak again until that sound had definitely ceased, and by that time he had weighed and calculated the value of all the gold offered him.

"Here are the figures," he said, submitting his account to the hermit, "and here is what I am to pay you, less my commission. Do you want any trade, or is it to be all money?"

"There are quite a number of articles required," replied the other, "and here is a list of them."

The sutler glanced at it.

"I can furnish everything here," he observed, "so that I may as well foot them now, and hand you the cash for the balance."

This course was accordingly taken, consuming a number of minutes, by the end of which time the utmost tension of his hearing in the direction of the smithy failed to bring the sutler any further sounds from the anvil.

To comprehend this silence was only too easy. The ex-cavalryman had finished the task he had undertaken.

Smiling, the sutler again glanced at the list of articles the hermit had purchased and proposed to take away with him.

"It will take us quite a few minutes to put them up," he said, "and during this time you had better remain quiet here, so that none of my customers will see you."

The hermit could only nod assent to such a wise precaution.

"Here are a few books and papers which may help you to pass the time," added the sutler, arising briskly. "I will return to you just as soon as I can."

And with a little nod of adieu he crossed the floor, turned the key in the lock, and passed out into the store, closing the door behind him.

To his joy, Jeb was just in the act of returning from the task of shoeing Clark's horse and giving himself admittance at the front entrance.

"Well, Jeb?" queried the sutler, anxiously.

"The thing's done!" declared the ex-cavalryman. "The marked shoe has been nailed on, and no one's the wiser."

The sutler rubbed his hands gleefully together, while his face glowed as redly as viciously.

"Just in time, too!" he breathed. "He intends this to be his last trip here for a long time to come, and will bring me no more gold. But, let him go where he will! We're now in shape to track him to his mine!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLD-FINDER'S PERIL.

THE sutler and the ex-cavalryman had packed up the bulk of the supplies demanded by Wind River Clark and handed them into the back room to him that he might tie them up in convenient shape for his return home, when a second visitor came sauntering into the sutler's store, looking around with keen and curious glances.

This new-comer was a formidable-looking rufian of middle age, whose natural ferocity of

aspect was not a little heightened by the arms he displayed, by the many scars on his face and by the reputation he had acquired during long years in the capacity of deputy-sheriff.

"What! have you come back to us, Garry?" cried the sutler, in undisguised astonishment. "I thought you gave us a final farewell when you left us six months ago."

"It was so reported, I believe," acknowledged the new-comer, with a grimace, as he sat down in a camp-chair, laying his rifle across his knees. "Put here I am, you see."

"The more's the wonder!" insisted the sutler, with an evident desire to probe the mystery of the deputy's presence. "It was said here, after your departure, that you would not dare return. I was told by one of the boys that Dick Fenton had sworn to kill you at sight."

"Dick did make some such rash statement, according to my friends," admitted the new-comer, with a grim smile, "but he passed in his checks at a little bit of a celebration last week, and I'm not at present inclined to speak ill of him!"

Lippman squirmed uneasily on his high stool, with the air of a man who is not getting paid for his trouble.

"Won't you take something, Natt?" he suddenly demanded.

"Not anything, thank you!"

The sutler looked bewildered.

"Well, Natt, this is the first time you ever refused me," he could not help saying.

"A few words will nevertheless explain my refusal," remarked Natt Garry. "I have good reasons just now for keeping my head particularly level and my nerves in as good tune as possible. I'm here to see a man, and expect to have important dealings with him."

The curiosity of the little trader deepened at these remarks to a positive uneasiness.

What could the visitor mean?

Who was the man Natt expected, and what was the nature of the dealings of which he had spoken?

"Do you hear any news, Natt?" pursued the sutler, after a brief pause.

"Yes, something very important!" blurted the visitor, with the aspect of a man who is getting impatient.

"Indeed? What is it?"

"I hear that Wind River Clark has made a great find of gold somewhere to the northward!"

"Indeed?" repeated the sutler, but this time in a faint and scared voice, while his face paled visibly. "Do you s'pose there's any truth in the rumor?"

"That remains to be seen, Hank," declared Natt Garry, turning his most searching gaze upon the sutler. "Don't you know anything about the matter?"

"I? No!"

"Hasn't Wind River Clark sold you a quantity of gold-dust and nuggets?"

"Not a particle," replied Lippman, without an instant's hesitation. "This is the first I ever heard of any such discovery!"

"Then why has Clark been running here every week lately, and sometimes every two or three days?"

"For necessary supplies, I presume."

"Does he always pay cash for everything he buys of you?"

"Always—unless he brings a bundle of skins!"

"And you've seen none of this gold they say he's finding?"

"Not a grain of it!"

Ere another word could be uttered, a second armed man came into the sutler's store, saluting each of its occupants with a short, separate nod and a good-natured smile, and then seating himself with an air that was as watchful as expectant.

Curiously enough, as he sat down he laid his heavy, old-fashioned rifle across his knees, as if conscientiously following the example Natt Garry had set him.

But here the likeness between them ended, as the new-comer hastened to call for a drink instead of waiting to be asked.

Jeb Pinckney at once served him, deeming the occasion a good one to enter upon his new duties as clerk.

"Any news, Mr. Sherwood?" asked the sutler, after a keen survey of the new-comer.

"Well, yes," replied Sherwood. "The talk is of gold!"

The sutler started as if shot.

Where was his secret drifting? How had these things come about?

"Gold!" he echoed, as he vainly strove to appear careless and indifferent. "What gold? What about it?"

"They say Wind River Clark has been finding it by the bushel," pursued Sherwood, "and that he's been running to you for months to sell it!"

The Israelite literally gasped for breath.

"It's a lie!" he cried, bringing his fist down savagely on the counter. "Who says any such thing? Who has been telling such abominable falsehoods?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," replied Sherwood, as he exchanged smiling glances with Natt Garry.

"But I hear quite a buzz about gold in various quarters, and almost every one agrees that Wind River Clark is the lucky finder!"

"I don't believe a word of it!" declared the sutler, as vehemently as if life and purse were at stake. "It's all talk and chatter! If Clark had made any such discovery, I would have been the very first one to hear of it, but he hasn't said a word to me on any such subject, or offered to sell any such gold to me!"

Both Garry and Sherwood looked at the sutler with a mocking, incredulous smile, but neither seemed inclined to continue the conversation, and silence succeeded.

During the next few minutes half a dozen additional persons gathered at the sutler's store, all of them presenting personal facts or points of character that could not have failed to fix the attention of Hank Lippman.

In a word, they were among the toughest characters to be found in the Territory. Two of them were known as squatters; the third as a prospector; the fourth was an idle civil engineer, who had long been hanging around the fort; the fifth an ex-stage-driver, who was waiting for a new line to be opened; and the sixth a drill-sergeant who had received his discharge several weeks before, and who had not yet got rid of his accumulated earnings.

All of these men were armed, and they seemed to be actuated by a common sentiment and purpose, as was more than hinted by many a glance that passed between them.

All called for a drink, thus keeping Jeb Pinckney busy at his new duties.

"A rum lot!" he found time to whisper to his employer, as he moved to and fro behind the counter. "What's their little game?"

"It looks as if they mean to make a raid on my cash-box," replied Lippman, in a corresponding tone. "Are you armed?"

"Naturally—as usual."

He showed a revolver and cocked it unheard and unseen, laying it on one of the shelves before him, in such a way that he could raise it at a moment's warning.

"I have received a hint that some of these pirates might make an attempt to scoop a few thousands," pursued Lippman. "Some one of the crowd seems to have discovered that I have of late been buying and shipping gold-dust and nuggets, and they know that to do this I must always have a large sum in ready cash at my elbow."

"But who can have got onto your secret?"

"Oh, some of the clerks or drivers connected with the Express."

Another personage appeared in the doorway at this instant, and was received with a pleasant nod from Lippman, who advanced as far as the well-stocked counter permitted to take him by the hand.

"Do you see what's up?" asked the new-comer, in a guarded tone, when a few conventional greetings had been exchanged, and Pinckney had opened a bottle of wine for him.

"Perhaps I do," replied Lippman. "But I'm by no means certain. I fancied they might be gathering here to make a raid on my cash-box, as desperate and foolish as any such act would be!"

"No, that's not what they're here for," declared the new-comer. "Permit me to give you the snap," and he dodged under the counter and came up beside the sutler, making a pretense of speaking of the merchandise, which he began to handle. "They are here to arrest one of your customers."

Hank Lippman could only look his astonishment at these declarations, and the new-comer hastened to add:

"I refer to Wind River Clark, who is now cooped up in your office, like a rabbit in his burrow! Natt and his friends are here to seize him."

A red flush invaded the little sutler's face a moment, and then receded, leaving it as pale as marble.

"How do you know these things, Wimble?" he demanded.

"Through a friend of mine, old Wixon, who was invited into the combine."

"But, what is their charge against Mr. Clark?" pursued Lippman.

"Oh, anything they can trump up—I don't know exactly what," replied Wimble. "There are of course a score of ways of carrying their point, which is to get hold of him by legal process. For instance, he can be arrested for trespassing upon the reservation of the Shoshone Indians, or for defrauding the Government, or as a suspicious character, or for alleged complicity with any of the other crimes which have been committed in the Territory during the last year."

"But this is infamous! a villainous conspiracy! the rankest injustice!" protested the little sutler.

"Of course it is," returned Wimble; "but are such men as Natt Garry and Jake Sherwood likely to be too particular as to the means they take to carry their ends? These men have heard of Clark's discoveries, and are bound to share his good fortune! They will have his secret or his life! The one thought of their hearts is GOLD! GOLD!"

CHAPTER IX.

CAMPUS IN POSSESSION.

THE horror with which Nettie realized her situation requires no description.

She was simply appalled.

The mere thought of passing the day at the mercy of the monstrous reprobate who had intruded upon her was enough to make her shudder.

Yet she strove to maintain a semblance of calmness, and even of hope, saying to herself that some event or accident might possibly bring a change for the better.

As to any weak appeals to the red-skin to leave her, she comprehended only too well that they would be useless.

"You've no idea how hungry I am," exclaimed Campus, after a keen glance in every direction. "I haven't had a mouthful to eat in nearly two days."

"You have come to the right place, then," returned Nettie, assuming an ease she was far from feeling. "Come into the shade and sit down," and she led the way toward the veranda, "or would you prefer to come into the house?"

"I'd sooner stay outside in the shade of these vines," replied Campus, "not merely because of these wounds, but because I'd like to keep a good watch around me and not allow any one to creep near enough unseen to get the drop on me."

"Then place yourself here," said Nettie, indicating the most desirable spot within view, "and I will get you a nice breakfast as soon as I can and serve it here on a little table. Have you any preferences in the matter, whether of food or drink?"

"Oh, not any. The essential is to get a good supply, and to get it here as soon as you can conveniently."

"Then, what do you say to half a broiled chicken, with toast, and ham and eggs, a cup of coffee and a pot of preserves with nice bread—"

"Enough, Nettie!" interrupted the intruder, with a grimace. "You really torture me!"

"Then make yourself comfortable here," enjoined the maiden, as she turned to enter the house, "and do not get impatient. I'll be as prompt as I can."

"One moment, Nettie!"

"Well, sir?"

"Do not give way to any attempt to make your escape! The moment I cease to hear you busying yourself about the breakfast, that moment I shall come looking for you, and you may rest assured that under no circumstances will you be able to reach the nearest woods."

"Do not fear, sir."

"Another thing, let me warn you against poking any old gun of your father's out the window at me," and he turned upon her a glance as baleful as that of a serpent. "I shall be on my guard, and my senses are just now so sharp that I could hear a mosquito tread 'Yankee Doodle' on a tin pan at two hundred yards. No nonsense!"

"Oh, I will give you no offense, Campus," assured Nettie. "I really feel sorry to see you so hungry and in such a condition."

"Bravo! We shall get on, I see, and soon become the best of friends. But I'm delaying my breakfast. Go!"

Nettie entered the kitchen, and such was the relief she experienced at finding herself out of the intruder's sight and immediate presence, that she did all in her power to keep him quiet and contented, making as much noise as was possible.

As has been suggested, she was a very excellent cook, and she now toiled under the strong incentive of keeping the red-skin good-natured and quiet.

In less than twenty minutes, therefore, after he took his seat on the edge of the veranda, he sat beside a rustic little table which was literally loaded with the succulent supplies Nettie had named, and many others.

"What a breakfast for one!" exclaimed the red-skin, in pleased astonishment, as he drew the table as near as possible.

"Well, ought not your breakfast to be a large one, in view of your long fast?" returned Nettie, as graciously as her very serious preoccupations permitted. "But you must not eat too rapidly, and it would be wise for you to begin with the toast and other lighter dishes."

The red-skin looked at her sternly, his suspicions aroused by the suggestion.

"Have you been 'doctoring' the toast in some manner, with a view to putting me to sleep, and so getting rid of me?" he demanded.

"Certainly not—"

"Then let me see you eat some of it!"

"You forget that I ate a hearty breakfast with papa just before you made your appearance."

"That doesn't matter! You must eat at least half of this toast with me. In no other way can I be certain that you are not playing a trick on me!"

Nettie could do no less than comply with the demands thus made upon her, but it proved about the hardest task she had ever undertaken.

"I begin to see that you are all right," remarked Campus, after watching her a few moments. "Are you willing to pledge me your sacred word that there is nothing wrong about the chicken or anything else on this table?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Then here goes!"

He began eating with a voracity that caused the girl to shudder.

"Remember how long it has been since you had such a good breakfast," she enjoined.

"I'd sooner bear in mind how long it may possibly be before I sit down to another like it!" declared the red-skin, with his usual jauntiness. "What a nice cook you are! What a wife you would make!"

"I am glad you are so pleased, Campus! I have certainly tried to merit your kindness and approval!"

"Could I trust you, Nettie, do you think, to bring me a drink of cool water from the brook?"

"Of course you could!"

"Then go and get it."

Nettie complied with the demand, plucking on her way back a handsome bouquet of flowers, which she placed in a tumbler on the table in front of her persecutor.

"They are certainly very pretty," he said, after snuffing at them two or three times. "How odd that you should have such a garden in the midst of such a wilderness! You and your father must have taken great pains with it and expended many a hard day's work upon it!"

"Yes, we have! But our labor here has been a labor of love. We have made ourselves a very pleasant home."

"I should say as much! What a pity it is that I should turn up here at just this moment, and wipe out all you and your father have accomplished!"

"What! after my kindness to you!" and Nettie looked startled.

"Oh, I don't care for your kindness to me," returned the conscienceless miscreant. "All you have done has been prompted by fear, and not by affection, and it is because of this fact that I hate and despise you!"

Nettie was at a loss what to say in answer to such declarations as these, and she accordingly remained silent, but she could not prevent a flood of tears from moistening her eyes, and into her heart crept a new flood of terrors.

"There! don't snivel, whatever you do," enjoined Campus, angrily, after watching her a few moments. "I hate a crying woman! There's nothing on earth which tires me out so quickly! Are you impatient for me to take my departure?"

"There can be no question of your taking your departure until after you have finished your breakfast!"

"That's true," assented Campus, with another keen glance around. "After a fast of two days, it's the height of folly to say a word on any subject until your stomach has been filled!"

He gave such close attention to his breakfast during the next quarter of an hour that Nettie could not have failed to realize that he was practicing the philosophy he had enunciated.

"There! I must say that I have never fared better," he finally declared, as he pushed away the little table. "I feel new again!"

"Is there anything more you would like? Won't you have another cup of coffee?"

"Nothing more, thank you."

The maiden arose and began clearing the table, going and coming. By the end of a few minutes the task had been completed.

"Would you like to take a look about the place?" she then asked.

"No, Nettie. I've taken a look at it already. The one thing I now need is a good sound sleep. I didn't sleep a wink last night, nor more than an hour the night before!"

"Then why not take a nap?" suggested the maiden. "We have a nice lounge which you can help me bring from the kitchen."

"Let me see it."

Nettie led the way into the house, pointing out the article in question.

"Sure enough, I couldn't have a better bed," declared the red-skin. "Let's place it in the pavilion, where the fine breeze now blowing will fan my slumbers!"

The measure was soon taken, Nettie watching the intruder sharply, as if wondering why he chose the pavilion for his resting-place, and then Campus lay down at full length upon the lounge, with a sigh of contentment.

"This just fills the bill," he declared, "but there are two drawbacks to my felicity."

"What are they?"

"One is that you may give me the slip as soon as my eyes are closed."

"And the other?"

"Is simply that some enemy may creep up here and shoot me as I slumber."

"Then what's to be done?"

"You will have to remain on the watch while I sleep."

"That I will do, Campus."

"And you will wake me up if you see any person approaching?"

"I will."

"And you won't run away? You won't so much as leave you out of your sight for a moment?"

"No, Campus."

"I can trust you, I think," declared the intruder, grimly, as he thought of the gold and money beneath him. "If you were to leave me—"

"But I won't, Campus. I have promised you that I will remain near you, watching over your slumbers, and that I will wake you up if any one approaches. This is what I have promised, and I would not tell a lie to save my life!"

"Well, I would! I'd like to tell a million at a cent each. But I think I can trust you," and he fixed her with his fiendish eyes. "Because you see, if you were to deceive me, I'd have a terrible revenge! The moment I wake up and miss you I'll set fire to the house and sheds and kill your horse—"

"Oh, there is no need of these threats, Campus," interrupted the maiden, with an involuntary shudder. "You can depend upon me. I'll watch near you and wake you up if anybody comes."

Satisfied at last that he could trust her, Campus closed his eyes, and in another minute was sleeping as soundly and calmly as an infant upon its mother's bosom.

CHAPTER X.

CAMPUS ENTERTAINS HIMSELF.

It is hardly necessary to say that Nettie kept her promise.

For more than three hours she remained on the watch near the sleeping intruder, driving the flies away from his unsightly wounds and two or three times bringing him a drink from the adjacent brook.

It can be imagined what a martyrdom this watching was to her.

At times she felt that her burden was too great to bear.

At length the intruder stirred abruptly, as if disquieted by some thought or apprehension, and arose to a sitting-posture, yawning violently.

"Well, here I am again, and there you are, just as you said you'd be, Nettie," he exclaimed, with a broad smile of contentment, "and I must say that I never had a better sleep. The only thing which troubles me now is the pain from these infernal wounds, especially that cut in my cheek."

"If you please, Campus," said Nettie, with a desire to continue her conciliating line of conduct, "I think I could dress those wounds in such a way as to afford you great relief."

"But what a job for you!"

"Never mind that. The more disagreeable the task may be to me, the more need there is for giving it instant attention. That cut on your cheek should have been sewed up as soon as possible. The flies have been at it, and you've no idea what a state it's in. If neglected longer, it may turn to gangrene and cost you your life."

"But what can be done with it?" asked the intruder, looking serious for a moment.

"Why, the wound can be cleansed, and I can put on plasters that will assist greatly in drawing the edges together."

"Have you the necessary materials?"

"Yes, all the essentials. Living in this retired spot, we are obliged to keep them, as we know not at what moment we may have occasion to use them."

"Well, if you're willing to undertake the job," said Campus, "go ahead. I shall be thankful if you relieve this pain and inflammation."

"We need not linger upon the operation."

It is enough to say that it was a task which few hospital nurses could have completed without disgust, but Nettie did not pause until it had been completed, as much to her satisfaction as to the relief of the patient.

At least an hour had been consumed in the process.

"What a change for the better!" was the final comment of Campus, as he arose again to a sitting posture on the lounge. "I wouldn't have believed you could do me so much good."

"I am very glad, I'm sure, that you are so greatly relieved," returned Nettie. "But I knew that such would be the case."

"What was that stuff that seemed to burn like fire?" he asked.

"It was a mild caustic, in which there is a great deal of carbolic acid."

"You have been very kind, Nettie," assured Campus, "and I shall not forget it. That sleep and this able treatment of those injuries has made a new man of me. I am both hungry and thirsty again, and will go and help myself to a lunch, if you have no objections."

"Shall I not get dinner for you?" asked Nettie.

"Not just yet—no. By the way, do you happen to have any whisky or brandy?"

"There is something of the sort in a demijohn at the bottom of the cellar-stairs," replied Nettie. "You can judge what it is better than I can tell you."

"How do you enter the cellar?"

"Through the kitchen."

The red-skin proceeded to the veranda and

entered the house, remaining out of Nellie's view nearly half an hour, during which time she heard him moving about repeatedly, opening doors and disarranging articles of furniture.

When he at length came out of the cottage, his face had taken a deeper tint from his potations and the excessive quantities of food he had swallowed.

In his hand he carried a small pitcher which he had filled from the demijohn of which Nettie had spoken.

"I must say that I have never fared better," he declared, as he dropped into a careless attitude on the lawn near the veranda. "This brandy is particularly good. Does your father use it?"

"Very rarely."

"You seem to be living here on the fat of the land," continued the red-skin, with a grunt of contentment. "How came you by all those vegetables I noticed in the cellar?"

"We raised them."

"And those meats?"

"They are mostly of our curing."

"Then your father is a farmer as well as a hunter and trapper?"

The maiden assented.

"Why don't he hire a man to work for him?"

"Perhaps because none has ever come here to offer his services."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About fourteen years, or ever since I was three years old."

The red-skin took a drink from his pitcher with a very thoughtful air.

"I had no idea your father was so comfortably fixed here," he said. "Do any of our people ever intrude upon you?"

"Never, and for good reason. We are not only guarded by the chiefs of the Shoshones, but by the representatives of the Government at the fort and throughout the Territory. What would Father Camp say if you were to be rude to me or treat me cruelly?"

"He might never hear of it," answered the red-skin, significantly.

"But suppose he should?"

"Oh, he's of no account! I do not care for him!"

"Nor for your own chiefs?" insisted Nettie.

"Not even for the Brown Bear?"

"No, not even for him!"

"Nor for the troops at Fort Washakie, or the Government behind them?"

"No, Nettie, I don't care for anybody nor for anything," avowed Campus, with the air of an outlaw who has taken his life into his hands.

"What is this Government of which I hear so much? It's as big a fraud as these fellows with shoulder-straps who represent it. It promises to supply us with ample rations, including plenty of fresh beef, and then it leaves us to starve by hundreds and thousands! But all that is a matter which I am not at present worrying about. I have quarreled with Father Camp and the Brown Bear, and have left camp forever!"

"After a terrible fight, I presume?" queried Nettie.

"Yes, after a fight, in which I killed a girl and two men," replied the red-skin, with sullen defiance. "That was two days ago, and I've been on the jump ever since!"

"Do you mean that some of your own people are in pursuit of you?"

Campus assented, again resorting to his pitcher of brandy for consolation.

Nettie heaved a sigh of relief.

She regarded this last avowal as a hint that help might yet reach her, and it was with a keen satisfaction that she marked how much her tormentor seemed to be drawn to the brandy.

A brief silence succeeded, and then Nettie resumed:

"Even if you don't care for Father Camp or any one else, you ought not to be cruel to me or to my father. What possible cause of complaint have we given you?"

"Not any, I'm frank enough to declare, Nettie!"

"Then why not go your ways, Campus, and leave me in peace?" the maiden ventured to suggest. "I have fed you and dressed your wounds, doing all that I could for you, and the least you can do is to spare me the pain and terror of your presence. Will you go?"

"No, I won't!"

"Why not, Campus?"

"Because I'm no such fool as to throw away the fortune fate has given me!"

"Tell me what you mean," pleaded Nettie, with a startled air. "What has fate given you?"

"You, to begin with," and the merciless miscreant turned upon her a glance that seemed to arrest the blood in her veins, "and, after you, all that gold under the pavilion, and all those gold coins and greenbacks!"

"What! you've heard—"

"And seen," interrupted Campus, finishing his pitcher at a swallow and tossing it toward the veranda. "I came here early this morning, while your father was at the Lookout, as he calls it, and saw you busy with your breakfast. I was a witness later of the visit you and your

father paid to the excavation under that pavilion. The 'wild animal' whose breathing attracted your attention was no other than myself!"

Imagine Nettie's anguish and horror!

CHAPTER XI.

THE GOLD-FINDER A BONE OF CONTENTION.

WITH what emotions the little sutler of Fort Washakie listened to the declarations of his friend Wimble concerning the intentions of Natt Garry and his posse could have been read in his wild, desperate eyes.

He realized that the "combine" against the gold-finder was already a deadly menace.

"The infernal sneaks!" he growled. "They mean to come between me and that man, do they? They ought to be killed!"

Not only did Lippman realize that he was menaced with the loss of the big profits he had been deriving from Wind River Clark, but he also saw that all his hopes in regard to the marked shoe would be neutralized if the plans of Garry and his associates were not instantly defeated.

"Of course, any one of the charges I have suggested would answer the purpose of the plotters, inasmuch as any one of them can be made the basis of a legal arrest," continued Wimble, "but I have no doubt from what I know of Natt Garry that his pockets are literally stuffed with warrants for the arrest of the hermit."

"But none of them will stick."

"They'll stick for a few days or weeks, or until the deputy and his gang can pinch the old hermit and force him to tell what they're so anxious to know. Once he is in their hands, they'll starve him or otherwise torture him. They may even pinch him through his daughter!"

"What! he has a daughter?"

"One of the loveliest girls there is in the Territory, according to old Wixon, who caught a glimpse of them as they were riding in the Sage Creek Valley."

"Then she must share her father's hermit-like existence, and anything that menaces him is, of course, a menace to her."

"And this meddling deputy may have an eye on both," suggested Wimble. "Be that as it may, Lippman, you cannot fail to realize how cleverly this fox of a Garry is shaping his means to the desired end in securing those warrants."

"Yes; but he won't serve them here," declared the sutler, with all his habitual energy, as the color began to return to his face. "Are you willing to do me another favor, Wimble?"

"As many as you like. What is it?"

"Slip out of the store and go around to one of the windows of my office. Attract the attention of Clark, who is waiting for another little parcel or two, and assist him out of the window with his packages and tell him where you'll meet him with his horse—which is under the shed—a minute or two thereafter. Comprehend?"

"Perfectly. Your object is not to let a trail be found leading from the window. Am I to give the hermit any message?"

"Merely tell him that Natt Garry and Jake Sherwood, with half a dozen armed men, are waiting in the store to seize him on some trumped-up charge, with a view to forcing him to reveal or betray where he gets his gold. As soon as this fact is made known to him he will of course ride for his life."

"And what shall I do next?"

"Go to my house and wait for me."

Wimble nodded almost imperceptibly and turned and passed out of the store.

Whispering a few words to Pinckney, the sutler made a pretense of gathering sundry cans and bottles into a pile, as if he had sold Wimble a considerable bill of goods.

His real attention, however, was given to a number of slight sounds which reached him from his private office, concluding with the double clatter of a window moving up and down in its frame.

These sounds had barely ceased when Natt Garry arose and suspended his rifle in the hollow of his left arm, with an air which meant business, at the same time advancing as near to the sutler as the counter permitted.

"Can I say a few words to you privately, Hank?" he asked.

"As many as you like, Natt!"

"Here, or in your office?"

"Here, or in my office—just as you please, Natt," answered the sutler, with smiling politeness.

"Then I'll see you inside."

Nodding assent, the sutler raised the swinging leaf in the counter, giving the deputy-sheriff admittance.

"This way," he invited.

With a step as crisp as his voice, Hank led the way into his private office, politely holding the door open until Natt Garry had entered, and then closing the door behind him.

"Death and furies!" suddenly came from the deputy, as he glared wildly around him, with glances which explored every recess of the apartment.

"Ah, what's the trouble?" asked Hank, with

assumed wonder, as he politely motioned his visitor to a chair.

"Where's that man?" roared Garry, as his eyes continued their vain quest.

"What man?"

"That hermit! Wind River Clark!"

The sutler assumed a smile of contempt and disgust.

"You seem to have Wind River Clark on the brain," he remarked, as he seated himself quietly at his desk. "It has been a couple of weeks since I saw him!"

"What rubbish, Hank! What do you take me for? Jake saw him coming here scarcely half an hour ago!"

"Saw him coming!" repeated Hank. "It's a pity, then, that he didn't see him arrive! If Wind River Clark has been near the store to-day, he has simply passed the door. He did not come in. Nobody has seen him here! I defy your whole posse to prove it!"

"Very well, Hank!" said Garry. "We'll soon show you what we think of your attempt to bluff us!"

He stepped to the door and called in his posse, bidding them search every nook and corner of the place, under tables and counters, and every spot where a man could have been hidden.

Hank looked smilingly on.

"Did I not tell you?" he sneered, when the vain search was over. "Wind River Clark has not been here since the first of the month!"

The falsehood was uttered with such vim that even Garry and Jake Sherwood were staggered in their convictions.

"To be sure, I didn't see him actually enter the store," admitted the latter. "But I saw him riding toward the shed, and naturally concluded that he would come here—as he has so often done before."

"Fine reasoning, truly," sneered Hank. "Because you see a man going toward a river, you take it for granted that he's going to have a swim!"

"He may have been here and left," suggested Garry. "He may have left by the window!"

"See if his horse is under the shed," ordered Sherwood. "If such is the case, the hermit cannot be far distant."

The result of all these inquiries and investigations was that Wind River Clark was no longer at the fort, and that it was extremely problematical if he had visited the sutler within a fortnight.

"So much for telling a lie and sticking to it," whispered Hank to Pinckney.

But Natt Garry was in no sense the dupe of the sutler.

"The man was here," he repeated, after the search was all over, "and I should have had him if I had come to this wider room at the very moment of my arrival."

"Well, why didn't you come, then?" returned Hank. "I'm sure I didn't get in your way or offer the least resistance to your movements."

"I was waiting for a man, and for another hint or two from outside," explained Garry. "In a word, Hank, I've let your customer slip through my fingers when I might just as easily have caught him."

"You're welcome to think so, Natt, if thinking so will add to your satisfaction," declared the sutler, who could not help looking contented, as he realized that every second was now adding to the gap between the hermit and his would-be captors. "From what you say, you really want to take him."

"Take him!" roared Garry, as he brought his fist down upon the counter in such a way as to make its contents rattle. "Well, I should hibernate! See here!"

He exhibited a handful of papers.

"I see!" cried Hank. "A dozen warrants, and yet they fail to bring your man!"

"They'll none the less get him later!" threatened Garry, as he thrust the papers back into his pocket. "His ranch is not so far away that we shall need to take a compass to find it."

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars against ten that you will never arrest him, Garry!" offered the sutler.

"Done!" roared the deputy.

The stakes were soon put up, Sherwood being chosen to hold them.

"And now come, boys," added Garry. "Let's see if we cannot make up for lost time."

His followers hastened to gather around him, and another moment his whole crowd had vanished.

CHAPTER XII.

HUNTING THE GOLD-HUNTER.

THE instant Hank and the ex-cavalryman were left to themselves by these withdrawals, the sutler sprang to the door and closed it, snatching the bolt.

"There'll be no more business transacted here to-day," he declared, "nor until we have looked in upon Wind River Clark at his mine or placer. I'm going to close the store, Jeb, and we'll strike out for the new diggings with that marked horseshoe for our guide."

"Wouldn't it be well to put some sort of a notice on the door?" asked Jeb.

"Yes, 'closed on account of sickness in the family,' Write it out on a card, Jeb, and nail it outside the door. That'll satisfy all inquiries from without, and that bulldog under the counter will attend to all communications from within."

"We shall need to take supplies, sir," pursued Jeb, as he set about writing the card.

"Yes, for three days at least."

"All eatables of course?"

"Naturally, as it's simply impossible to carry drinks for that period without overloading the horses. I'll proceed to pack a couple of bags, which can be laid in front of our saddles."

"I'll mention a few things that must not be forgotten," said Jeb, who had been engaged in many a wild expedition in his time, and who had already flushed with delight at the thought of taking part in another. "Some matches and soap are almost as essential as ammunition."

By the time he had written his card and nailed it to the door, he had made as many suggestions as could readily be acted upon, and we may be quite sure that they comprised almost everything that was necessary to the comfort and safety of the sutler and himself during their proposed absence.

"Are we to ride away openly, Mr. Lippman, or shall we steal away under cover of the approaching night?" was the next inquiry of the ex-cavalryman.

"We must go in disguise," answered the sutler, tersely, "and we must get away just as soon as we can. What do you think of Wimble? Shall we take him into partnership with us?"

"Why shouldn't we, seeing that Garry's party exceeds half-a-dozen?"

"Excellent. That settles it. Wimble shall go with us, and be killed when we are, or rise with us to fame and fortune!"

The two bags were soon packed, and Hank then threw one over his shoulder, giving the other to Jeb, and led the way from the store, after a keen look from one of the windows.

"We shall be seen," whispered the sutler, "but what of it? No one can blame me for taking home a few supplies, and no one can force you to decline an invitation to spend the night with me."

He led the way toward the north entrance of the fort, where the departure of the couple was witnessed by two or three sentries, but without attracting the least attention or suspicion.

"There is just one fear," suggested the sutler, in a low tone, as he cleared the fortifications, "and that is that Garry may be able to find Clark readily, or even know just where he lives!"

"And it's just as likely that he has been spending the last six months at some camp of the red-skins," suggested the ex-cavalryman, "and that he may know as little about the headquarters of the hermit as he does about the North Pole!"

"At any rate, we needn't worry about him till he shows a better hand than he did to-day," said Lippman, with a chuckle. "One thing's clear enough," he added, with a glance along the trail, "and that is, that neither he nor any of his men have yet gone in the direction Clark has taken!"

"No, and it's doubtful if they get the start of us. You have horses for all three of us?"

"Yes, and the necessary disguises," returned Lippman. "And here we are!"

The couple turned into a walk leading to a neat little dwelling, with veranda and chimney, which the sutler had ventured to build in a beautiful spot just outside of the fort, but still well under the protection of its guns.

On the steps of this cottage sat Wimble, with an air of jubilation which attested that his share in the hermit's escape had given him great pleasure.

"You had no difficulty in getting rid of Clark, did you?" was Hank's greeting.

"Not the least. He came to me the moment I tapped on the window."

"And no one saw you take his horse from the shed, or saw him ride away upon it?"

"Not a soul!"

"He took his usual course to the north, on the Sage River trail?"

Wimble nodded.

"Come in, both of you," invited Lippman, as he produced a key and unlocked the door, pushing it open. "Walk into the parlor. The plan is this, Wimble, Jeb and I have resolved to turn gold-seekers, and to this end we are going to seek for the but or home of Wind River Clark. You will of course come into the arrangement, with the understanding that I will furnish cash, horses, arms, supplies and everything else that may be needed!"

"Come into it? Of course I will," replied Wimble, "and a thousand thanks for the chance of doing so. It's true, then, that the hermit has made the great discoveries ascribed to him?"

"Yes, and I will give the details of my dealings with him while we are getting into our disguises—for disguise we must, in order that Garry and his party, to say nothing of Clark himself, may not know us!"

"Bravo!" cried Wimble. "I see the point.

We are not only to hunt the hunter, but we are to keep an eye on our rivals, who would forestall us in reaching the hermit's treasure."

We need not pause upon the preparations of the trio for their work.

In the course of half an hour after Hank's return to his house, three men rode away from a little grove at the rear of it in a leisurely sort of way, as if out for a little jaunt.

They were a strange-looking trio, and would hardly have failed to be regarded as suspicious characters by any one encountering them.

After a sufficient turn under cover to carry them away from the view of everybody at Fort Washakie, they struck the Sage Creek trail, where they instantly dismounted, giving careful attention to the latest footprints it presented.

"Ah, here we are!" suddenly cried the ex-cavalryman. "Here is the track of the marked shoe!"

"What! simply a bar-shoe!" exclaimed the sutler. "Excellent! Nothing could be more certain and striking in all soils and in all situations. We can track our man to the end of the world, if necessary."

"But can we overhaul him?" queried Wimble. "Just note the sort of gait he was going when he passed this point!"

"That signifies nothing," returned Lippman. "The faster he rides the sooner he'll have to stop. And when he comes to a stop—which will doubtless be at his retreat—we shall not be far behind him."

"Hark!" suddenly cried Jeb Pinckney. "What's the clatter behind us?"

The trio listened intently, while Jeb carried a glass to his eye.

"As I thought," he added. "The new-comers are Nat Garry and his crowd, and they're going for the hermit and his treasure!"

It was only too true!

Already two rival bodies of unscrupulous men were in eager quest of the hermit's gold!

"Quick!" enjoined the sutler, as he gained his saddle at a bound. "We must have the first chance! They must not overhaul us!"

His example was followed by Jeb and Wimble, and away went the trio like a tempest, with the clatter of Garry and his posse behind them.

Clearly enough, Wind River Clark was in a fair way to have upon his hands a crowd of gold-seekers who would make short work of him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHANCE FOR NETTIE.

THE change in the mood and bearing of Campus did not cease with his refusal to leave and with a statement of his reasons for that refusal.

He grew more threatening every moment, as if annoyed by Nettie's hint that his room was better than his company.

"Leave you?" he snarled, after waiting in vain for an answer to his declarations. "Not just yet, my charmer!"

He arose and strode toward the cottage, picking up his empty pitcher on the way, and soon returned to his easy attitude on the lawn, with a fresh supply of the gold-finder's excellent brandy.

"We'll get out of this, Nettie, as soon as I get rested and primed," he remarked, after he had swallowed another liberal dram. "The whisper of GOLD had begun to be heard in our camp when I left, although no one knew from what quarter it had come or what to think of it. How lucky I've been to tumble upon the retreat of the solitary discoverer! How fortunate to have arrived here just in time to lay hands upon all those nuggets and all that money! How delightful, for me to have such an excellent chance of getting away with this treasure in the course of the afternoon!"

It can be imagined how these conscienceless rejoicings pained Nettie.

She was at a loss in what terms to protest, or how to give a more agreeable turn to the thoughts and schemes of the intruder.

"And not only am I the possessor of this great secret," pursued Campus, as his black eyes glowed like fire, "but I alone possess it, after your father and yourself. Not only do I know that the valley of the Wind River is a PLACER, but no one else is likely to share the secret, as I shall take good care to control the destinies of your father and yourself for a long time to come!"

Nettie grew sick at heart as she reflected how long it would be before the hermit could return from Fort Washakie.

"And with all this vast fortune at my disposal, resumed the red-skin, after taking another drink, "don't you see that I'd be an utter fool not to lay hands upon it? Especially at such a moment, when I have become an outcast and an outlaw in the minds of my own people? At a moment, too, when you also, Nettie, are entirely at my mercy?"

"Oh, Campus! let me go!" cried Nettie, as a dreadful despair began tugging at her heart. "You must not be cruel to me, after all I have done for you!"

The red-skin started violently at this juncture, giving his attention suddenly to his wounds, from which it had been temporarily diverted by thoughts of the vast fortune at his disposal.

"How they burn!" he cried. "How they pain me!"

An inflamed throbbing had come to his cheek, as a simple result of the feverish rush of his blood to it under his unwonted excitement.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, literally glaring at Nettie, with all the intensity of a keen suspicion.

"Can it be that you have tricked me?" he cried abruptly, as he pressed his hand to his face.

"How tricked you, Campus?"

"By pouring poison into my wounds."

"Nonsense, Campus!" returned Nettie, as she gained her feet, flushing with the pain caused her by the absurd suspicion. "Don't be so unjust and foolish!"

"But, didn't you poison me?"

"Of course not. I bound up your wounds as tenderly as if I had been dealing with my own father!"

"Then why this pain?"

"It is simply because you are getting your blood into such a commotion with your brandy, and with all this talk of the treasure! Lie down on the lounge and stop drinking! Try to be calm!"

"I'm in too much pain to keep still!"

"Lie down, Campus, and I will bring a cooling embrocation that will relieve you in a few minutes, if you will be calm and give it a chance!"

"Very well. Let me have it."

"I will go into the house and get it," returned Nettie, as she moved in the direction indicated. "I shall be back in a few moments!"

The very accusation of the savage had given her an important suggestion.

Among the medical supplies in the desk of her father, was a small quantity of morphine, which had been treasured up against the possible emergencies of such a life as the hermit was leading, and it suddenly occurred to Nettie that she could turn this drug to good account.

It was not only possible to relieve the red-skin's pain with it, but she would stand a very good chance of putting him into one of the soundest of slumbers!

All she had to do was to insert it in a bottle of liniment, and deluge the numerous wounds of the intruder with the mixture!

She realized how dangerous was any such proceeding to herself, as he was capable of emptying the contents of the bottle down her throat at the least suspicion of it or of her motives.

By the time Nettie had reached the house, she had turned over in her mind the project in all its bearings, and had come to the conclusion to run the risk of the attempt.

Inserting the morphine in the liniment, which was one of those ordinary local preparations which are to be found in almost every house, Nettie gave the bottle a few vigorous shakes, and hurried back to her tormentor.

He had taken possession of the lounge again during her brief absence, and was holding his head and groaning in such a way as to attest that he had degenerated terribly from the wonted stoicism of his people.

"Is that the stuff?" he demanded, catching the bottle from Nettie's hands. "Am I to take it all?"

"You are not to take any of it," replied Nettie. "You are to bathe your face with the mixture. Lie down again, and let me apply it!"

Campus gave her a sharp look, which showed clearly enough that he still regarded her with some suspicion, but he complied with her injunction, and she proceeded to bathe his wounds, gently directing the liquid with her fingers to those parts where it would take instant effect.

"You're a good girl, Nettie," the patient ejaculated, after a long and watchful consideration of the effects of the medicament. "That is indeed a cooler! How delightful! how soothing!"

"Shall I continue, Campus?"

"Yes, keep pouring it on until I tell you to stop!" enjoined the red-skin. "It goes to the spot, sure enough! But as fast as the pain goes away I seem to get drowsy! What if I should fall asleep?"

"Well, what if you should? You would forget all about the pain, and the cure of your wounds would go on all the more rapidly!"

"But that isn't what I mean, Nettie! If I should go to sleep, you'd have a chance to run away!"

"But I don't wish to run away, Campus!" protested Nettie. "I must remain here to await the return of my father."

"Then you cannot feel at all annoyed if I take measures to make sure of you," declared Campus. "I shall really have to take another nap, and I shall sleep all the better if I know beforehand that you'll be here when I wake up!"

He sprang up abruptly, his mien changing

precisely as the mien of a tiger changes when it ceases to play with a victim!

"What do you mean, Campus?"

"I mean that I cannot go to sleep until I've made sure of you!"

He extended his hand and seized her, dragging her to the entrance of the stable, where he laid hold of a long piece of rope which had been used as a lariat.

"You wouldn't be so mean and cruel, Campus!" protested Nettie, beginning to struggle violently.

"But I would, though," and his grasp became still more determined. "If I give you the chance you'll run away, and carry off all that gold and money."

The continued protests of the maiden were unheeded, as was her desperate resistance, and in another minute the red-skin had tied her hands behind her with such fast knots that she was as helpless as a child.

"There! that's the first step toward passing the day in peace and harmony with you!" muttered the red-skin, as he dragged her toward the pavilion. "All I have to do now is to hitch the other end of the lariat to one of the limbs of that pine we were practicing upon, and you will be unable to take leave of me until I give you permission."

He proceeded to take the measure last suggested, while his swollen and inflamed visage glowed with a jubilation little short of infernal.

"This cruelty and violence is entirely unnecessary, Campus," said Nettie, struggling for the mastery of the terrors which assailed her. "You would have been much wiser to treat me as a friend!"

The red-skin smiled mockingly.

"That's all baby-talk," he declared, "and I've heard it before to-day. I know just what I am about, as you will learn before the day is ended. Where's that bottle?"

Nettie indicated by a nod where she had dropped it at the beginning of the struggle, and Campus hastened to resume possession of it, and to extend his burly figure anew upon the lounge in the pavilion.

"I can now sleep in peace," he declared, as he proceeded to pour a fresh supply of the liniment over his face. "You are sure to be here when I wake up. Don't fail to tell me if you see or hear any one coming."

The maiden sunk into a rustic chair which happened to be within the limits allowed her by the lariat, and strove to face calmly the horrors of her situation.

The manner of Campus became more and more drowsy and tranquil with every application of the liniment.

"You were right, Nettie, in saying you could help me," he remarked, after a brief pause. "That terrible pain of which I was complaining has almost left me."

"Keep quiet and it will soon be all gone," assured the maiden. "I'm glad the medicine is doing you good."

With what anxiety she waited.

Remembering that the wounds of her tormentor were partially healed and that a large share of the embrocation would be wasted she had no fear that any serious harm would result to him from its use.

On the other hand, as she recalled his recent sleeplessness and fatigue, she was entitled to hope that a free application of the liniment until he was unconscious would retain him in a deathlike sleep for many hours to come.

To be sure, such a period of unconsciousness might be of no use to her, as she could hardly hope to free herself from her bonds, but it would at least afford her a chance of being rescued by the enemies to whom he had alluded, by the hermit himself, or by some passing hunter.

Gradually the attention of the red-skin to Nettie and his surroundings grew less marked and persistent, and the few sentences he uttered became confused and incoherent.

"Remember!" was his final injunction. "If you see anybody—you must call me. Sure to see you when I wake up. Never saw such medicine. Feel ever so much better. We'll hunt for gold together."

The rest was an inarticulate murmur, and the next instant the heavy and regular breathing of the red-skin announced that he slumbered.

Not only was he soundly asleep, but he was in a fair way to remain so at least several hours, and a gentle sigh of hope and relief escaped Nettie as she realized that there was still a chance for her.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GOLD-FINDER AND HIS PURSUERS.

ON and on thundered the rival pursuers, both groups of them equally intent on tracking Wind River Clark to his mine or placer and wresting the same from him.

This was now their one great purpose and hope—the one all-absorbing aim of their existence.

For this the sutler had deserted his business and his stock of goods, and for this Natt Garry had emerged from his long and mysterious retirement.

The sutler and his two associates, Jeb and Wimble, continued to take the lead a couple of miles further without exchanging a word, so intent were they on making a success of their labors.

An occasional glance to the rear during this time was enough to tell them that the deputy and his associates were at least maintaining their distance, and a recognition of this fact caused the brow of Hank Lippman to become more corrugated with anger than ever.

He grew more and more disgusted every moment with the impudence Natt Garry had exhibited in trying to get hold of the hermit.

"I'd like well to see those fellows get their labor for their pains," he at length growled, with fierce emphasis. "But how can we trick them?"

Neither Wimble nor the ex-cavalryman could answer this question.

"If we undertake anything against them," suggested Jeb, "we shall have to work in the dark, since they have decidedly the advantage of numbers."

"But there is one weighty point in which we are ahead of them," said the sutler. "We know that we are really following the hermit, but they don't."

He reflected earnestly a few moments and then added:

"I dislike immensely to have them hammering at our heels in this fashion."

"I was about to say as much," returned the ex-cavalryman. "We are not only in a fair way to use up our horses within a few hours, but we may overshoot our trail so far at any moment as to have difficulty in picking it up again. Why not let these chaps take the lead?"

"There's only one objection," replied Wimble, "and that is that they might be the first to overtake the hermit."

"There would indeed be danger of that if Clark were to stick to this trail for any considerable distance," remarked Lippman. "But he won't do that. He never has done it. He always turns off within a few miles of the fort and goes his way by some secret path of his own. It's really essential, therefore, for us to slow up and watch for the spot where Clark leaves this trail, or we shall soon be as much at sea as those chaps behind us."

The associates of the sutler were both crafty enough to appreciate this reasoning.

"You've often been here before, Jeb?" suddenly asked Lippman.

The ex-cavalryman nodded.

"Then watch for a hiding-place into which we can turn while they pass us."

"There's a suitable place just ahead of us," returned Jeb, "and we need not go twenty rods out of our way to reach it."

The nook in question was soon reached, and the trio waited here in silence until Natt Garry and his party had swept past in their furious pursuit of the hermit.

"Good riddance, curse them," muttered the sutler as he led the way back to the trail. "The more they do that sort of thing the better they will please me."

By the time the trio were again following their route, Natt and his friends had passed out of sight ahead of them.

"That leaves us in possession of the field," said Lippman, with a sigh of relief, as he again sought and found the track left by the bar-shoe. "We can now watch this track at our leisure, and follow it to the retreat of the hermit."

"But where is that retreat?" asked Wimble.

"Nobody knows," replied Lippman, "but I do not believe it's north of Sage Creek, or even north of the fort. We shall find in due course that he has pulled to the left within a few miles of here, and that he has gone around to the northward of Sage Hill, in the direction of the Wind River Range."

"I only hope that such will prove to be the case," said Jeb, with a glance at the sun, "for we shall soon have a moonless and cloudy night upon our hands, and shall have to tie up till morning."

"That's true," assented Wimble, "for even if we could follow the track of the bar-shoe with a light, it would be a fool's game to do so, inasmuch as the said light would announce our approach to the hermit, and allow him ample time and space to keep out of our way."

This sort of comment and inquiry was continued for another half-hour, during which the trio continued to ride at a moderate pace to the northward.

"We are getting nearer to Sage Creek than I desired or expected," suddenly exclaimed Lippman, "and at this rate I shall soon feel called upon to revise my theory concerning the whereabouts of the hermit's retreat."

"This is certainly the direction in which he has gone," said Jeb, scanning the trail anew, "and it is also that in which the deputy and his posse are still going. Possibly the retreat of the hermit may be nearer the Wind River than you supposed, Mr. Lippman."

The mere suggestion was enough to trouble the sutler's equanimity, and he became preoccupied and gloomy.

But suddenly he started, with a joyful exclamation, drawing rein.

"At last!" he cried, with outstretched hand. "This is as far as Clark came in this direction! Here is where he pulled to the left, taking leave of the trail."

There was no gainsaying these conclusions.

The track of the bar-shoe was easily to be traced, as it descended from the trail into a narrow treeless bottom, and bore away to the westward.

"You were right, after all," exclaimed the ex-cavalryman.

"Yes, I was, and that rascally deputy and his posse are already as much at sea as if they were adrift in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean!"

It was only too evident.

The deputy had before him the many thousands of square miles composing the Shoshone Reservation and the Wind River Valley, and not the least clew to even the direction in which his intended victim had vanished.

"And now to ride straight up to the hermit's door," proposed Lippman, with a joy he could not conceal. "Won't he be astonished to see us? That bar-shoe was a glorious thought, Jeb. See how it cuts into this thin, sandy sward, leaving a trail as easily followed as the track of a railway. Let's be lively now," and he led the way in the new course pointed out to him by the bar-shoe. "Our man cannot be more than an hour ahead of us, and he may be considerably less than that, as he'd naturally take things easy after reaching this point."

With what joy the trio pressed on in their new course will be readily imagined.

"Of course I don't blame Clark for trying to keep his secret to himself," observed the sutler, after a brief pause; "and of course he can't blame us for trying to wrest it from him. Besides, I do not think he will be unreasonable. When he once sees us at his very door, he will no doubt be willing to allow us to take a hand with him on very favorable terms!"

Thus rejoicing and scheming, the trio followed the track of the bar shoe through the sandy bottoms for a distance of two miles, when it suddenly vanished into a rapidly-running creek of considerable dimensions.

With what blank countenances the conspirators exchanged glances of surprise need not be stated.

"Why, this must be a branch of the Sage Creek!" exclaimed the sutler, the first to find his voice.

"No, it's the Sage Creek itself," returned the ex-cavalryman. "The fact is proven alike by the volume of water and the rapidity of the current!"

"Perhaps the hermit merely crossed it," ventured Wimble. "We may pick up his trail on the other side."

The attempt was made, but it was soon seen to be hopeless.

"No, he turned up or down," recognized the sutler. "Let's try both directions, and see if we can find any trace in the bed of the stream, or the particular spot where he took to the bank."

The suggestion was duly acted upon, the trio searching the stream for a mile above and below the point where the bar-shoe had reached it, but not the least clew was found as to the course the hermit had taken.

The bed of the creek was everywhere a sand, at least in this portion of its course, and such was the rapidity of the current that all traces of a horse's hoofs were washed out as soon as formed, as the excited plotters readily assured themselves by the movements of their own horses.

"The game is blocked, it seems!" cried the sutler, with an oath, after more than two hours had been consumed in a vain exploration of the creek, and the first shadows of twilight had begun to gather around him. "There is not the least chance of finding out where Clark pulled out of the creek after reaching it. It's not even possible to say whether he went up-stream or down. We've lost him!"

The gloomy faces of Jeb and Wimble attested that this view of the case was fully shared by them.

"And what a horrible state of things it is for us," added the sutler, as he turned his gloomy face toward the fort. "We are as much at sea as is Natt and his party!"

The fact was beyond all question.

CHAPTER XV.

INTERCEPTED!

WIND RIVER CLARK had indeed got clear of his pursuers and left them in the most complete uncertainty in regard to his whereabouts.

No especial effort to this end had been necessary, however.

He had simply done anew what he had long been in the habit of doing.

On reaching Sage Creek he had turned up the stream, proceeding a couple of miles in a depth of water that rarely exceeded a couple of feet.

Then he had pulled out upon the right bank at a point where a swift mountain-torrent joined the

creek, bringing with it a long bar of sand and gravel which was as firm as an ordinary road.

As to the bar-shoe, he had detected it before leaving the fort out of sight behind him.

He knew, therefore, just how active and energetic his enemies had been in their resolve to track him, but the discovery did not cause him the least anxiety and barely called a smile of contempt to his lips.

He knew his splendid bay well enough to know that no horse at the fort could overhaul him, and that this attempt to track him by a marked shoe would be fruitless.

As to a counter for this scheme, it cost him neither time nor effort.

As he reached the bank, after his long ride in the stream, he dismounted and muffled the feet of his horse, stuffing them with clay under a packing of leaves and grass, and covering them with stout wrappers from his bearskin jacket.

The result of this measure was apparent at a glance as soon as the hermit resumed progress.

The horse did not leave any perceptible trail behind him.

At the very moment, therefore, when the sutler and his associates reached the spot where the bar-shoe trail was lost in Sage Creek the hermit could have been seen ascending one of the northern slopes of Sage Hill, from which he soon turned into a lateral ravine which communicates with the valley of the South Fork, in one of the upper nooks of which his retreat was situated.

The ravine in question is a vast, deep fissure, more or less wooded, and comparatively free from rocks or other obstructions, which crosses the high ridge or foothill which is thrown out to the eastward between Sage Creek and South Fork, and which terminates in Sage Hill.

This ravine contains many zigzags, rarely being straight for a hundred rods at a time, and one of its peculiarities is that its south end abuts a precipice, so that it really affords no communication between the two valleys.

It had long been utilized by Wind River Clark in all his journeys to the fort and elsewhere, and for many good reasons.

In the first place, the use of this route was calculated to deceive everybody in regard to the actual whereabouts of his retreat, inasmuch as no one following him to Sage Creek would have ventured to suppose that he lived in the South Fork valley.

Another reason why the gold-finder used this roundabout path is to be found in the fact that his retreat was almost inaccessible from the south or from the side nearest to the fort.

For a time the hermit pushed on in the weird solitudes of this ravine, walking at the head of his horse and keeping a sharp lookout around him.

As could have been seen by the preoccupied expression of his face, his narrow escape from his enemies at the fort had greatly intensified the uneasiness and anxiety of which he had spoken to Nettie in the morning, and which had for some days been growing upon him.

"Yes, the whole charm of my residence in these solitudes is broken," he suddenly ejaculated, as he heaved a profound sigh. "I shall never know peace again. The Shoshones will not hesitate a moment to leave their camps and villages the moment they hear that gold has been found in this quarter. That entire company of soldiers which was mustered out of the service to-day may come here in a body, if a rumor of my discoveries should reach them. That gang of cut-throats and outlaws who call themselves the 'Pioneer Brothers' may be expected to join in the rush. I see that I have made a mistake. It was foolish for me to deal with Lippman. I should have been more careful. I have been in too much haste to convert my findings into money. A hundred daggers will henceforth be pointed at my throat, and the worst of it is that I have imperiled the happiness of Nettie, instead of assuring it, as was my hope and intention. Would that all the gold in the world were at the bottom of the ocean! What a strange fatality it is that the discoveries I have made should bring me only evil, and possibly despair and death!"

He started abruptly as he finished these gloomy reflections, and began examining the trail closely.

"Here are tracks which were not here this morning," he recognized, with a sort of wondering dismay—"the tracks of at least three horses!—and they seem to have gone toward the south, after striking the ravine here from the west. They cannot have reached the South Fork without passing very near our hidden home. Can some prowling band of outlaws, red or white, have passed here since I started for the fort?"

The mere possibility of such a state of things was enough to fill the hermit with apprehension.

Resuming his place in the saddle, he quickened the pace of the animal to a gallop wherever he could, with many a nervous glance into the rapidly-gathering shadows around him.

Denser and deeper became the gloom of the great forest, as night descended upon the scene,

but it was scarcely more marked than the shadow which took permanent possession of the gold-finder's features.

"Ah! what if harm should come to me from all the machinations of which I shall henceforth be the object?" he at last said to himself. "What fate would be Nettie's?"

From time to time he paused to listen, as if disturbed by some sound which had fallen upon his hearing, and more than once did he halt to send a keen glance of inquiry into some dark covert, as if apprehensive that a deadly enemy might be lurking there to capture him or kill him.

He had reached a narrow, rocky pass, in which he was obliged to walk his horse, when the animal suddenly came to a halt, throwing its head high into the air and snorting with fright.

How quickly Clark scented danger, and how promptly he slipped to the ground, detaching his rifle from his shoulders, need not be told.

At that very instant, however, a couple of dark lanterns near at hand were uncovered, throwing a powerful light upon the scene, while five or six armed men presented themselves beside the hermit, one of them taking his horse by the bridle.

"You will please halt a moment," said the latter, who was evidently the leader of the newcomers. "We have something very important to say to you!"

The hermit had recognized with his first glance at the strangers that he was powerless to escape from them or to fight them, so closely and quickly had they invested him, and so great was their advantage in numbers.

"Say on!" was his response, as he looked from one to another.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PIONEER BROTHERS.

"You are Wind River Clark, are you not?" continued the previous speaker, with a mien and voice sufficiently stern to be termed menacing.

"I might respond to your question by asking by what right you intercept me here and ask after my identity," replied the hermit, with calm and quiet dignity, as he looked around fearlessly upon the eager faces bent toward him. "Nevertheless, as I am in a hurry, and your show of force is not necessarily intended to intimidate me, and especially as I have no reason to deny my identity to any human being, I beg to say that Wind River Clark is the name by which I am generally known."

"Where do you live?"

"A few miles south of this spot, on the upper waters of the South Fork."

"On wild land?"

"No, I live on land belonging to the Shoshone Reservation, and of which I am in legitimate possession, having leased the same for a long term of years of the Brown Bear, with the approval of his chiefs and people."

"Then you are not a squatter on Government land?"

"No, sir."

Here followed a brief pause in the conversation, during which the newcomers exchanged a few observations in low tones among themselves, with an air of disappointment.

"We hear that you have been finding a great deal of gold lately, Mr. Clark," resumed the leader of the newcomers, as he again turned to the hermit. "Is such really the case?"

"I have found some, sure enough," replied the hermit, who, seeing himself beset by so many strange men, and remembering his daughter's utter helplessness, was naturally anxious to be as conciliating as possible.

"You have found some! Where?"

"In various places, within a score of miles of my dwelling."

"On Government land, or on the Shoshone Reservation?"

"On both."

Again there was a brief pause in the interrogatory, the leader of the newcomers consulting in a low tone with his associates.

In fact, this pause lasted so long that the gold-finder took the liberty of breaking it.

"How did you know of my presence here?" he demanded.

"That's easily told," replied the leader of the intruders. "One of our boys saw you quite by accident as you passed here this morning. We had no trouble to guess that you were on your way to the fort, and that you would return home by this route in due course. We have accordingly been on the watch here for you a number of hours."

"May I ask what you want?"

"Certainly. We want you to tell us, in all candor, how much gold you have found, and where you have found it."

"By what right do you ask?"

"The simple right of good-fellowship, and even of good breeding," answered the spokesman of the newcomers. "Unless you pretend to own 'all creation,' Mr. Clark, I think you will agree that all the gold you have found in these hills is as much ours as yours. To judge by what you have affirmed or admitted, you have been a trespasser on all the lands, both

Government and Indian, for a wide distance around you, and have carried away from these lands a vast fortune to which you have no right whatever!"

The hermit flushed impatiently, but did not lose his self-control.

"I protest against these assumptions," he returned, calmly. "They are not true. The gold I have found is mine by fact, law and custom, and no one has any right to demand an accounting from me. Nevertheless, if any of you have been aggrieved by anything I have done or am doing, I trust you will make complaint and bring me before the nearest Justice of the Peace, when I shall be glad to furnish such information, documental and otherwise, as you can hardly expect me to furnish at this hour of the night and in such a situation!"

He inclined himself respectfully, as he took his horse by the bridle, and made a movement toward resuming his journey.

But three or four of the strangers, including their leader, instantly barred his way with their persons.

"That is all very well, Mr. Clark," said the latter, "but it doesn't exactly respond to the situation. We are not law-abiding citizens, who have nothing better to do than to carry you before some rural Dogberry, but birds of a different feather!"

The hermit started violently, as if the very significant tones of the speaker had given him a far more serious view of the situation than he had previously taken.

"Who and what are you?" he asked.

"I have the pleasure of replying that we are members of the association known as the Pioneer Brothers!"

"What! robbers!" cried the gold-finder, involuntarily, for the first time changing color, as if shocked by what he heard.

"Well, yes," avowed the leader of the intruders. "I see you have heard of our worthy Brotherhood, and I readily divine from your manner that there is no necessity of entering into details concerning our being and history!"

The hermit sighed, with the air of a man who realizes that he is in a very awkward situation.

Under the simple and misleading name of the Pioneer Brothers, a large number of men had moved into the Wind River Valley the preceding summer, with the avowed intention of farming, stock-raising, and promoting immigration.

Originally a score in number, they had since increased to fifty-five or sixty.

They had founded, just outside of the Shoshone Reservation, on the north, near Owl Creek, a neat little town, in which were a number of frame houses, and had gathered around them a great many horses and cattle, with all the other usual features and aspects of a colony.

For a time, in fact, no one outside of the Brotherhood had conceived the least suspicion that there was anything wrong about the Pioneer Brothers.

Gradually, however, the truth had leaked out through a variety of scandalous acts and outrages into which we need not enter.

They were a "close corporation" of outlaws whose ruling idea was to live at the expense of their neighbors.

The hermit had for some time been familiar with the exploits and attributes of these rogues, and had learned to regard them as the very worst gang of marauders and cut-throats which had ever infested the Territory.

"I am frank enough to say that I am sorry to make your acquaintance," said the gold-finder, after a brief pause, with quiet dignity, "but if you will tell me where I can find you at noon to-morrow, I will call and spend an hour or two with you, or as much time as may be required to give you in detail the information you seem to be seeking."

At this proposal, which, it is needless to say, was made in perfectly good faith, the Pioneer Brothers laughed long and loudly.

"You'll excuse us, Mr. Clark," returned the leader of the band, "but we are not quite so green as to let you go, after we have been so fortunate as to lay hands upon you. You will please consider yourself our prisoner till further orders!"

The hermit thought of Nettie, who was accustomed to expect his return at about that hour, and a tremor of anguish shook his frame.

"It's unnecessary, neighbor, to charge yourself with my safe-keeping," he ventured to remonstrate. "You can always find me at my cottage whenever you may wish to see me."

"Thanks for the assurance," said his questioner, "but we cannot accept it as an equivalent for your personal presence. You will have to go with us!"

"Go with you? Where?"

"To our headquarters. We have received orders from Captain Harvester to seize you wherever we could find you, and bring you before him."

"Not at Owl Creek, I hope?"

"No, not a quarter of that distance. The captain has come this way, with a large detachment of us, within a few days, and our present camp is only a few miles from us at this moment."

"I dislike extremely to go with you," declared the hermit, as blandly as possible. "Can we not make other arrangements? Will not Captain Harvester come and see me to-morrow, or send you in his stead?"

The questioner shook his head energetically.

"The orders of Captain Harvester are imperative," he declared. "He wants particularly to see you at his headquarters, and it's a mere waste of time to say a word to the contrary. Will you go quietly with us, or shall we be compelled to use violence?"

The hermit could only resign himself to the inevitable, but he did not do so without a long sigh of agony, as he thought of the vain watch Nettie would keep for his coming.

After a ride of several miles through the woods, the prisoner riding between two of his captors, who kept the light of their lanterns turned constantly upon him, the little party approached a large fire which was located in the midst of a camp of armed men, and which was readily seen to indicate the headquarters of the Pioneer Brothers.

As much was shown, too, by the noise and excitement which greeted the new-comers, and by the haste and delight with which a score of outlaws gathered around the prisoner, as the little party arrived within a few yards of the fire, coming to a halt.

"Here we are, Mr. Clark," announced the leader of his captors, dismounting, "and just in time, it seems, for here comes Captain Harvester!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A PRISONER.

"I AM glad to see you have made a success of it, Lieutenant Moonlight," was the greeting of the captain of the band, as he advanced into the firelight and shook hands with the leader of the men who had captured the gold-finder.

"Where did you encounter him?"

"In that ravine where Moxley saw him this morning, captain."

"As he was returning from the fort?"

"Exactly."

Captain Harvester could not have looked more pleased if he had received news of falling heir to a fortune.

He was a tall, powerfully-built man, with an aspect that was not particularly displeasing, and with a bearing and speech which suggested that he had been used to good society—as is the case with so many outlaws of the Wild West—and that he had fallen to his present level because of certain marked defects in his moral nature.

"We are very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Clark," was the remark with which he turned to the hermit, after exchanging with his lieutenant the few words we have placed upon record, "and I am quite willing to excuse you if you are not in a mood to reciprocate the compliment."

"Thanks for your indulgence, captain," returned the gold-finder, with all the calmness habitual to him, although with visible annoyance. "As I have already indicated to Lieutenant Moonlight, my present position has no charms whatever for me. So far is this from being the case that I must ask you to be as brief with me as you can, and let me take myself off to more congenial quarters."

At this remark the captain and lieutenant of the Pioneer Brothers exchanged a smile which came very near being a burst of laughter.

"Why, bless you, Mr. Clark," then said Captain Harvester, "you'll make a serious mistake if you remain in that saddle with the idea that we have only to ask you a few questions and let you go."

"What! do you mean to keep me here?"

"Till morning at least, and probably much longer," avowed the captain.

"To what end, if you please?"

"Has not Lieutenant Moonlight indicated the nature of our interest in you? We desire to know all that you know, Mr. Clark, in regard to the existence of gold in this neighborhood, and you certainly don't look to me like a man who can tell all he knows of such a weighty business in a couple of minutes. Shall I help you down, sir?"

"No, thank you. The force of gravity will suffice for that movement."

The hermit slipped lightly to the ground as he spoke, at the same time removing from the withers of his handsome bay the aggregated bundle of supplies he had purchased of Hank Lippman, the sutler.

"What have we here?" asked Captain Harvester, as he laid his hand on the somewhat bulky package, feeling of its contents.

"A few supplies I was taking home with me," replied the hermit, endeavoring to be as inoffensive as possible.

"May I look at them?" queried Harvester, with a nod to his lieutenant, and in another instant the latter had seized upon and opened the package.

"Ah! a shawl, and collars, and fine boots, and a lot of laces, ribbons, buttons and other things, which can only be intended for a lady," exclaimed Harvester, in undisguised astonishment. "What does this mean?"

"These things are for my daughter," avowed the hermit, with desperate frankness, as an unwonted pallor invaded his cheeks.

"What! you have a daughter!" cried Captain Harvester, in a half-incredulous tone. "Well, I reckon this is the first hint any of us have received in regard to her existence. You purchased these things of Lippman?"

The hermit assented.

"Take his horse away, Griff," ordered the captain, addressing one of his men, and you, Walsh—you may carry these supplies to my tent. I must give them a more critical examination at my leisure."

The two Pioneer Brothers hastened to act upon the orders they had received, while a look of scornful indignation gathered upon the features of the hermit.

"If you dealt with that little Jew sutler, Mr. Clark," then said Harvester, as his gaze came back to the hermit, "you must have given him an equivalent for the articles purchased. How did you pay him?"

The gold-finder made a gesture of impatience and annoyance.

"I must say to you, Captain Harvester," he replied, "that your conduct savors of violence, even as your questions savor of impertinence. What have you to do with my transactions with Hank Lippman?"

"A great deal, as I will show you," answered the captain, with a flush indicative of gathering excitement. "It is said that you have made frequent trips to the fort lately for the sake of selling gold-dust and nuggets to that sutler. Is this remark true?"

"That concerns Mr. Lippman and myself!"

"It also concerns us!" said Harvester, surlily. "Fortunately we need not waste time upon you, Mr. Clark, or 'burst in ignorance' because you don't care to answer a civil question. We have ways and means of reaching the truth, and you'll have to excuse us for using them!"

The captain made another gesture to Moonlight, who beckoned a couple of his followers to his assistance, and in another minute the cash paid to the hermit that afternoon was produced and counted, as much to the surprise of the Pioneer Brothers as to their delight.

"About as I supposed!" cried Captain Harvester, as he looked around jubilantly upon his followers, and thrust the money into an inner pocket. "More than two thousand dollars, as you have seen, boys! Not a bad haul—for a beginning!"

"And not a bad indication of the size of his findings and washings!" exclaimed Lieutenant Moonlight, with a smile which was reflected in every countenance around him, with the exception of the hermit's. "It's easy to see that we're not barking up the wrong tree. This man has found on awful pile of gold during the last two months, and it's safe to say that he can tell us where we can each and all find a fortune!"

"You hear, Mr. Clark?" said Captain Harvester, again turning to his prisoner. "After all you have seen and done, you will not be surprised to hear that the fame of your discoveries has penetrated as far as Owl Creek, where, as you must have heard, the Pioneer Brothers are engaged in wresting from nature a portion of her bounties. In fact, we have heard so much of your dealings with Lippman, and of Lippman's transactions with the banks of Wyoming City, that we have come down here to take a hand in the game!"

"As much has been said to me by Lieutenant Moonlight," returned the hermit, as he stepped nearer to the camp-fire, extending his hands toward it, with a view to the suppression of a nervous chill which had begun to assail him. "I regret to add that you are not the first who has been seized by this laudable ambition. No less than two other parties have been seeking to lay hands on me this afternoon," he added, bitterly, "so that you must really be wide-awake if you hope to keep my pursuers at a distance!"

"Thanks for the suggestion," returned the captain, half-ironically. "I will be wise in time."

He turned to his lieutenant and added:

"You may put a guard around the camp, Mr. Moonlight. Such a measure would not be necessary, if you had not made this capture, but with such a man as Wind River Clark in our hands, we cannot be too careful."

The lieutenant hastened to make a detail from the men swarming around the fire, and in a few minutes the camp was inclosed by a cordon of sentries who were armed with rifles and revolvers, and who had been instructed to let no one pass in either direction without giving the countersign.

Paying sufficient attention to these arrangements to see that his orders had been duly carried out, Captain Harvester again presented himself at the side of the gold-finder.

"Having thus provided for the worst, Mr. Clark," he said, "I shall be glad if we can come to a friendly understanding between now and this time to-morrow. We would like you to pilot us, after breakfast, to one of the places where you have found gold, and give us a chance to secure as large a fortune as you have

already secured. Should you take this course, you will be restored to freedom just as soon as you have given us due evidence of your good intentions."

"And if I refuse to be dragooned or plundered in this fashion?" demanded the gold-finder, haughtily.

"We shall have to take such measures as we can to bring you to your senses," declared the captain. "It seems that you have a residence, or retreat, at no great distance from this spot, and it cannot be a very difficult matter for us to find it. It seems, too, that you have a daughter, and I dare say she would not hesitate to tell what she knows, if she were to fall into our hands, and we were to make her life and liberty, or even yours, dependent upon her frankness!"

The stern face of the gold-finder became still more serious at these menaces.

"I am not sorry you have spoken with such frankness of your wishes and intentions," he declared, "and I will respond to it by saying that neither my daughter nor myself will ever give you a particle of information under such conditions as you have seen fit to lay down!"

"That remains to be seen," returned Captain Harvester, grimly. "Meanwhile, allow me to offer you such hospitality as our camp can furnish, subject to no other drawback than the presence of a sentry at each end of your tent, to make sure that you will be found when wanted. This way, please."

The captain led the way toward a neat wall tent which had been pitched in the center of the camp, and in front of which burned a second fire of ample dimensions, lighting up the scene to a considerable distance around it. He was followed by the prisoner, who was in turn followed by Moonlight, and in another minute the trio had vanished within the captain's tent.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"MANY A SLIP," ETC.

If Captain Harvester and his lieutenant had looked at their prisoner a little more closely, they would have seen that he was in a desperate mood, and would have probably taken more efficient measures for his safe-keeping.

To tell the truth, they were doubly deceived in regard to him—first, in regard to his strength and agility, and in the second place in regard to the state of his views and feelings.

In other terms, they were thrown off their guard by the very quietude of his manner, and by his age and the unformidable aspect he presented.

They little comprehended how much he had been angered and annoyed by the treatment he had received at their hands, or with what a watchful and thoughtful gaze he had taken in all the facts of his situation and surroundings.

Still less did they understand what wild thoughts had traversed his soul, in connection with the perils to which his daughter was exposed, or what risk she was prepared to confront for the sake of giving them the slip and returning to her presence.

"I am to remain here, then?" he asked, as he halted within the captain's tent, and bent a keen glance upon the various objects around him.

"You are, sir," replied Harvester, politely motioning the prisoner to a camp-chair at one side of the tent. "Yonder is your bed," and he indicated one of two camp-beds ranged along one of the canvas walls. "It is hardly necessary to say that we have plenty to eat and drink, and that we can honor almost any reasonable demands you can make upon us!"

The prisoner stood his rifle against the nearest wall and sat down, with a careless nod of comprehension.

"I do not care for anything to eat or drink at present," he replied, as his eyes turned upon a sort of camp-chest near the entrance. "I am rather tired than hungry, and will at once take possession of my bed, if you have no objections."

"Whenever you please, Mr. Clark," said Captain Harvester, with an air of satisfaction, as the hermit proceeded to the bed which had been pointed out to him and extended himself upon it. "Allow me to add that you need not have the least fear of being intruded upon by any of those parties who are seeking for you. One of us," and he nodded toward Moonlight, "will be constantly on the watch here during the night, not to speak of such a number of sentries that no one will be able to enter the camp or leave it unnoticed."

Again the prisoner bowed understandingly, closing his eyes, but suddenly he started up with the air of a man who recalls something he had forgotten.

"Ah! my horse!" he ejaculated. "All this chatter about gold has caused me to forget him. I must go and feed him and give him some water!"

The captain and his lieutenant exchanged glances full of merriment.

"That is unnecessary," returned Harvester.

"The boys have already fed and watered him."

"Pardon me if I insist," said the hermit, as he gained his feet. "I shall have to use that

horse a great deal to-morrow, especially if I should decide to show you the gold fields I have discovered, and the very least I can do is to see that he is not neglected."

"You can show him that it's all right, lieutenant," said Harvester, as he took down one of the lanterns by which the tent was lighted. "Of course this anxiety on the part of Mr. Clark is perfectly unnecessary, but at the same time it is natural and harmless, and it's a mere matter of good nature and a little trouble to oblige him."

He passed the lantern to Moonlight, and gave point to his remarks by a gesture.

"Come, then," invited the lieutenant, as he loosened his revolvers suggestively in his belt. "If you were a younger man, or a more desperate one, I should think twice before meeting you half-way in any such nonsense. But come!"

He led the way from the tent and then drew the arm of the hermit within his own, conducting him toward an abrupt wall of rock which formed the back of the camp.

Here, under some oaks, were a score of horses, in charge of several men, who were lounging around a camp-fire of the finest proportions.

"Have those horses been fed, Griff?" asked Moonlight, as his gaze encountered the man to whom the hermit's horse had been consigned.

"Not yet, sir."

The hermit uttered an ejaculation of approval.

"That's quite right," he declared. "They are too warm to feed yet."

A cheerful whinny came from the bay at this moment, attesting that he had recognized the voice of his friend and owner, and at the same time pointing out his whereabouts.

"I will make a point to rub him down myself, lieutenant, if you are willing to oblige me to that extent," resumed the gold-finder, as he moved toward his favorite, "and we'll feed and water him afterward. He's too good a horse to be left to the care of strangers."

Reaching the animal's side, the hermit gathered a handful of grass, and began wiping the legs and loins of the bay very carefully, the lieutenant holding his lantern.

"Have you been in the regular service, lieutenant?" asked the gold-finder, after a brief pause.

Moonlight assented.

"Ever been in a battle?"

"Not exactly in a battle, but in a number of very lively skirmishes."

"Ever seen a man shot?"

"Yes, several."

"Can you swear that you ever shot one yourself?"

"Well, no!"

The hermit rubbed the nigh fore-leg of his favorite until it shone like a polished mirror.

"Did you ever see a finer leg than that?" he asked.

"Never," replied Moonlight, as he held his lantern nearer, examining the limb with an air which showed that he was well informed on the subject.

"To come back to the subject of which I was speaking," remarked the gold-finder, as he gave his attention to the off foreleg. "Did you ever reflect what vast quantities of bullets were fired in those skirmishes for the few persons killed? It is said by writers in good repute that about two thousand bullets are fired on the average battle-field for every soldier who falls?"

"Certainly, a great many are wasted," avowed the lieutenant. "But I should think the estimate you have given a great deal exaggerated."

"Oh, not at all," assured the gold-finder, carelessly. "In proof of that fact I may mention that Baron Jomini, in his history of the Wars of Napoleon, mentions that twenty-two million bullets were fired at Waterloo, although the fact is notorious that the killed and wounded did not exceed twenty thousand. As another proof of the difficulty of killing a man, even when he stands up close to you in broad daylight, I may quote the annals of dueling in all countries, which show conclusively that only one bullet in twenty-five or thirty does execution. As to the little there is to be feared from a few shots at a distance of several rods on such a night as this, your own experience will probably enlighten you soon, if it has not done so already. But just look at that leg," he added, suspending operations. "Isn't it a beauty?"

"It is, indeed," responded Moonlight, advancing his lantern, as before. "You've evidently given him a great deal of care."

As that last word came from the lips of Lieutenant Moonlight his lantern was dashed from his hand, becoming extinguished, and the hermit leaped to the back of his horse, at the same time cutting his halter and uttering a yell that awoke the echoes for a quarter of a mile around him.

Evidently that yell was a signal to which the bay had been well-trained, for he sprang away at a furious gallop, very naturally taking the direction of his home, or that from which he had come.

"Stop him! shoot him!" cried Moonlight, as soon as he could find his voice, which was not till horse and rider were several rods from him and going like phantoms.

Of course the lieutenant joined practice to precept, sending several shots in the direction of the fugitive as soon as he could, but he could not flatter himself—after the statistics which had been furnished him—that they were of any account or that any result was likely to accrue from the three or four random shots that were discharged in the darkness by his sentries at the objects which so suddenly traversed their field of vision.

CHAPTER XIX.

IMPROVING HER OPPORTUNITY.

As the minutes wore on and Nettie saw that Campus did not make any further remark or movement, she experienced such an intense relief that it brought a flush to her cheeks.

It was a marked change for the better to be freed from the constant menace of his waking presence.

In addition to this present relief, she was not without a well-defined hope of a further amelioration of her situation.

That her father would return early in the evening, as was his wont on the occasion of his visits to Fort Washakie, there was no reason to doubt.

In the mean time might she not be able to help herself?

Arising, she walked as near to the pavilion as her lariat permitted and bestowed a long and earnest scrutiny upon the sleeper.

How terrible he was, even in the inertness of that slumber!

Determined to test the soundness of that repose as the first step toward doing anything for herself, Nettie called to him repeatedly, but no notice was taken of her, not even when she repeated her calls in a louder tone, and she could do no less than conclude that the morphia she had mixed with the liniment was doing its work.

Ah, if she could now make her escape!

She looked at her horse, which was still nibbling the grass on the lawn, within a few rods of the spot where Campus had left it, after snapping his "patent loop" upon it.

Then she glanced in every direction around her, listening with all the intentness of which she was capable.

Not a sound reached her that could suggest either assistance or menace.

Evidently she had nothing to fear for the moment—and nothing to hope save from her own resources and exertions.

Fortunately, as the sun had scarcely reached the meridian, she had a long afternoon before her.

Where and how to begin?

The first important feature of the situation which fixed her attention, was that the red-skin had not tied the lariat around the tree itself, but simply around its lowest limb, at its point of contact with the trunk.

The result of this negligence was that the end of the rope could easily be worked outward or toward the end of the limb, it forming a huge loop, and at length be slipped over the end of the limb, and so detached entirely from the tree.

Having seen the possibility of this maneuver at a glance, Nettie devoted all her cleverness and energy to its execution, and in due course succeeded, thus gaining her first great point—that of detaching herself from the tree.

Her next measure was to draw the rope across the chair she had been occupying, and so raise it to such a height that she could reach it with her hands, which it will be remembered, had been tied fast behind her.

This task was so well accomplished that she soon had the entire lariat looped from the ends of her fingers, and in this way she walked off into the nearest woods, leaving her persecutor out of sight behind her.

The joy which thrilled her at these results can be imagined.

She had not only taken leave of the red-skin, but she was at liberty to keep going as long as she pleased, without leaving him the least clew to the direction she had taken.

For a few moments she walked on slowly, asking herself what was the best course open to her.

She was familiar with the route by which her father was in the habit of going and coming, and her first thought was naturally to go away upon that route a sufficient distance to avoid all risk of being captured by Campus, and there await the return of her father.

But what a misery it would be for her to endure all the afternoon and evening the constraint of that rope which was cutting into her wrists.

Could she not be rid of it?

At the very moment this query traversed her mind, her gaze rested upon an angular rock at the spot where her father had found the bulk of the stones he had used in laying up the walls of his cellar.

At one corner of the piece of rock in question

was a broken edge that was nearly as sharp as a knife.

"Why can't I make use of it to cut myself clear of this rope?" was the thought that instantly struck her. "I have heard of prisoners ridding themselves of their bonds under much more difficult circumstances. Then why should I despair?"

The least she could do was to make an effort to free herself.

She had all the afternoon before her, and the mere fact of making an attempt would be an instant and constant relief to her.

Proceeding to the rock in question, she braced up against it, and began giving her hands a sawing motion across its sharp and jagged edge.

She continued this operation until she was weary, and then paused for a brief rest, regretting that she could not note the results of her efforts.

She did not doubt in the least, however, that she had already made considerable progress in the desired direction.

Returning to the task, she again sawed the lariat on the edge of the rock, paying no attention to an occasional contact of her hand or arm with the granite, and not resting again until rest had become an absolute necessity.

Again and again were these attacks repeated, with intervals of rest, and at length a rosy flush of hope appeared on the maiden's face.

She had remarked that her hands and arms were not so closely confined as at the beginning of the struggle, and the only supposition by which she could explain this circumstance was that the lariat had been worn nearly in two by its long and violent contact with the edge of the rock.

Thus encouraged, she made a final and supreme effort, and in due course found the rope so weak, that she was able, by a desperate effort, to break the few strands which still remained intact.

At last she was free!

How her every thought and feeling roused into new life at the thought!

And now for her course?

Should she go away on the route toward the fort, and wait and watch at some favorable point for the return of her father?

To do this, was to leave Campus in possession!

It was also to leave at his mercy the house, stable, and horse, and all that gold and money under the pavilion!

Should she do this?

The idea was rejected even before it took definite shape in her mind.

Why shouldn't she then turn the tables upon him?

If his slumbers were as sound as she supposed them to be, why shouldn't she take from his vest pocket the key she had seen him place therein, and set free her horse?

Why shouldn't she, with the aid of some stout bags, transfer all the treasure under the pavilion to some near place of safety?

Why shouldn't she, in case Campus was in a sleep sufficiently sound to warrant the measure—why shouldn't she envelop him in such a network of cords that he would be unable to move hand or foot, at the moment of his next awakening?

Of course she must be guided by circumstances, and not risk her own life and liberty rashly—not even for the sake of all the gold her father had discovered—but she was strongly inclined to give the brutal ruffian a Roland for his Oliver, if she could do so within the limits of safety and prudence.

Sauntering back toward the house, she proceeded to her father's room, and armed herself with an extra revolver, which was usually kept loaded in a drawer, although seldom used, and then retraced her steps toward the pavilion.

Let what would come, the brave and resolute girl was certain that Campus would not again lay hold of her arm until she had taken a shot at him.

As she reached the side of the pavilion, and looked through the latticed work upon the sleeper, she could not have possibly failed to realize that his senses were well under the influence of the deadly narcotic she had so cleverly administered.

His mouth was wide open, his head thrown back, his face flushed vividly, and his snoring so loud that it filled the whole garden.

Determined, prompt, and as light of touch as a zephyr, Nettie entered the pavilion and secured the key of the "patent hoppel," and in another minute had freed her favorite, led him to the shade back of the stable, and placed her saddle upon him.

Within a couple of hours, she had removed all the treasure and money from the premises, and had concealed the bulk of it at a spot as retired as it was difficult of access, and yet at no great distance.

And then came the grand question—Should she meddle with Campus?

If she did so, and he awoke to a consciousness of the fact, what a perilous situation!

On the other hand, if she left him in possession of his freedom, his first act, on awaken-

ing, would be to burn the house and stable, as he had threatened.

Nettie could not bear the thought of such a desecration of the abode in which she had so long lived, in which she had been so happy, and which had cost her father such a world of care and labor.

Her decision was soon reached.

She would take the risk of an attempt to reduce the terrible savage to helplessness.

Securing a handful of stout but flexible ropes, which included the one from which she had freed herself, she returned in silence to the pavilion.

CHAPTER XX.

IN A TRYING SITUATION.

THE aspect of Campus was so terrible, even in his slumbers, that only the desperation of her circumstances could have induced Nettie to take the risk she was incurring.

At the same time the sleep of the red-skin was so profound that it furnished the strongest kind of a temptation for the brave girl to enter upon the execution of her purpose.

A single instant she hesitated, and then she placed her revolver on the floor of the pavilion, in such a position as to leave it constantly under her hand, and entered upon her task.

With what gentle touches she passed the cords around the limbs of Campus and drew them into firm knots, will be readily imagined.

Thanks to the drug which had taken such a strong hold of his senses, the red-skin was an excellent subject for these attentions.

Within fifteen or twenty minutes, he had not only been bound hand and foot, but he had been attached to the lounge so firmly that he could not make the slightest movement.

Not once did he stir while this task was in progress, but even as it reached completion, he opened his eyes suddenly—perhaps because of the vigor of her concluding attentions—and gave utterance to a wild yell of consternation.

After the annoyances she had had with him, it was natural for Nettie to enjoy the marked change she had effected in their relations.

She listened as smilingly as quietly to the howls of surprise and wrath of her prisoner, and noted with serene content the utter uselessness of all his attempts to break the bonds in which she had enveloped him.

At length he ceased his cries and struggles from simple exhaustion, and fixed his eyes glaringly upon her.

"Who has been here?" he asked. "The Brown Bear and Father Camp?"

The maiden shook her head.

"The Brooker boys? Those fellows who are in pursuit of me?"

"I've seen nothing of them."

"Ah! I comprehend. Your father has come back sooner than I expected?"

"Not yet, Campus!"

"Then how is it that you are here?"

"I freed myself."

The red-skin looked incredulous.

"How can that be?" he asked.

"You were careless in hitching the rope to the tree, Campus," explained Nettie. "You left a large loop, and it was possible for me to draw the same over the end of the limb. Then I went away to a sharp rock where I severed the rope by friction—with no worse results than a good deal of fatigue and a few injuries to my hands."

She held them up to his view, showing him how much they were chafed and bruised.

He winced and looked uneasy.

"I see you have set your horse free," he resumed. "You must have taken the key from my pocket!"

Nettie nodded assent.

"How soundly I must have slept! You were not afraid of me?"

"Whether I was or not, I did not hesitate to take the chances. You were very soundly asleep at the moment."

She picked up the bottle of liniment, which had slipped from the breast of the red-skin to the floor, at the moment when his drowsiness overcame him, and emptied its contents upon the ground from the steps of the pavilion.

"Have you removed that gold?" pursued Campus as he glanced at the position of the sun in the heavens.

"What better could I do, seeing that you had discovered the secret of its whereabouts?"

The red-skin winced again, taking in the full extent of his changed relations to his intended victim.

"What are your plans concerning me?" he ventured, after a pause.

"To leave you where you are until the return of my father."

The prisoner groaned at the thought.

"I shall die before that time," he declared.

"You do not expect him till evening?"

"No, Campus."

This answer seemed to inspire the prisoner with a feeling akin to desperation.

"What if those Brooker boys should find me here, between now and that time?" he ejaculated.

"Well, what if they should?"

"They'd kill me at sight! The girl I shot is their sister!"

"They are Shoshones?"

"Like myself—yes."

"They may not come," suggested Nettie.

"Of that you must take your chances."

"You—you won't release me, Nettie?"

The maiden shook her head.

"No sooner than I would set free a hungry tiger!" she declared sternly. "You have been very cruel and brutal to me, and you would be again!"

"No, Nettie, I swear it!"

She cut him short by a gesture.

"There is no use of saying a word to me," she added. "I shall not remain here to bandy words with you, but am going away in the direction of Fort Washakie to intercept my father."

"One moment, Nettie—"

"Not one, Campus. I cannot remain here longer. If you are wise, you will save your breath and strength, for it will probably be several hours before you can use either to advantage."

With a little nod of adieu, she went out of the pavilion, taking her way across the garden to the spot where she had left her horse.

It was in vain that Campus called to her repeatedly, imploring her not to leave him in such a terrible fix.

She did not so much as look back at him.

She had loaded her horse with several sacks containing the money and a portion of the nuggets she had removed from the excavation under the pavilion, and it was her intention to convey this treasure to a small cave which lay beside the route her father had gone, and scarcely a mile from the cottage.

At this moment, however, she experienced, as was natural, such a sharp reaction from all the excitement and unnatural strength which had characterized her for several hours preceding, that she feared her senses would leave her, and was obliged to cling to the withers of her horse for support.

For a few minutes, as she stood there, the voice of Campus resounded in fierce curses and threats, and then all was still.

What had happened?

Had the red-skin become silent lest the enemies of which he had spoken should be in the neighborhood and find him?

Or had he found some flaw in the bonds Nettie had put upon him, and did his silence mean that he was devoting all his faculties at an attempt at escape?

The spur of these queries soon removed the temporary weakness and exhaustion of Nettie, and she was able to proceed with the measure of which we have spoken.

Reaching the little cave without delay or other incident, she transferred all her sacks of treasure to its depths, and then sought out a snug retreat in the neighborhood in which to conceal her horse.

Then she walked back to the little bluff where she had seen her father on his return from the Lookout, early in the morning, and took possession of a leafy covert from which she could survey all the principal features of the premises, including the pavilion.

Here she watched for hours, or until darkness had set in, with all her senses on the alert, but without seeing or hearing anything of an intruder, other than Campus, whose occasional volleys of curses attested how angry and annoyed he was becoming with his captivity.

With the advent of night, Nettie realized that she might now be looking for the return of her father, and she accordingly sauntered away in the direction in which she had concealed her horse.

How nervous and anxious she had now become, will readily be understood without the telling.

Never before had her senses been so active as at this moment.

It seemed to her that the great solitudes around her were full of human beings, and that she could not only hear voices and firearms, but that she could see lights shining through the distant tree tops and even hear the tread of men and horses, while all sorts of prowling enemies crept toward her in the darkness and silence.

Of course a good share of these impressions are to be ascribed to the imagination or to sheer nervousness, but they were none the less disquieting and painful.

As the evening wore on, Nettie placed herself beside the route by which she expected her father to return, and watched and waited for his coming, while a flood of anxious queries assailed her.

Had all gone well with him? Was he sure to return in safety?

With what unrest she waited!

CHAPTER XXI.

FURTHER ARRIVALS.

HE came at last like a burst of thunder!—with such a rush and clatter, it is safe to say, as had never before been heard in that lonely ravine!

The very sounds of his coming were a revelation to his waiting daughter.

Clearly enough, he was in trouble!

Nothing less than the direst necessity could induce any man to ride at such a furious pace and in such darkness in a region where he was liable to encounter at any moment some tree or rock that would bring his wild ride to an abrupt and disastrous termination.

Could it be that the horse really had a rider, or was he approaching at that mad gallop alone?

Had he been frightened and thrown his rider, or was it with the gold-finder's own volition that he was coming with that risk and swiftness?

Was it her father's horse at all, or was it one of those wild steeds which are still to be found in limited numbers in these great solitudes?

As these queries flashed through the soul of the listening girl in one wild tumult of dread and expectancy, she felt faint and nerveless, and could hardly have remained on her feet if she had not grasped a sapling which came opportunely to her hands.

At this instant, however, her own horse uttered the cheery cry of recognition and welcome with which he always greeted the arrival of his mate, even after a brief absence.

No further doubt of the identity of the approaching horse was possible.

It was really her father's!

Quickened into new life and hope by this fact, Nettie drew a wax taper from her pocket and lighted it, holding it up to the wind in such a way that it speedily grew to a large flame, illuminating a considerable space around her.

Then she placed herself exactly in the path of the approaching steed, and watched and waited.

Nearer and nearer came that thundering tread, and ere long she began to discern the weird outlines of a man and a horse, but with this striking particularity, that the head of the man was bowed low beside the withers of his steed, in an evident desire to lessen the risk of contact with the trees and bushes.

Another moment, and the horse began to moderate his pace, and the next instant he came to an abrupt halt within a few yards of the spot where Nettie was standing.

How rapidly he panted!

What a long distance he had evidently come at that furious pace, to judge by the flecks of foam on his sides and by his distended nostrils.

"Ah, there you are, my child!" cried the gold-finder, as he slipped to the ground and ran toward her. "What joy to see you again!" and he caught her to his breast. "For the first time in my life I have experienced the horrible fear, since I left you this morning, that I should never see you again."

"Oh, papa!" returned Nettie, caressing him wildly between sobs and ejaculations of delight, "you have been in some dreadful peril."

"Yes, Nettie," announced the hermit, his voice husky and panting. "I have come back to you from the very jaws of death."

The maiden recoiled from him at this moment, her features blanching with wonder and terror.

"See, papa," she cried. "Your face is covered with blood, and your clothes are torn into shreds. Look, too, at the sides of Sachem," and she held her light to the flanks and hips of the horse. "Where have you been?"

"We have been running the gantlet of a thousand trees, limbs, and bushes," explained the hermit, "and it seems a miracle that I have not been swept from his back, and that he has not come in contact with some tree or rock."

The maiden comprehended only too well what risks both horse and rider had run in that wild flight through the forest.

"But I must say that we have every reason to rejoice and be thankful that nothing worse has happened," resumed the gold-finder, after he had drawn his

breath a few times pantingly. "I have had a terrible experience. I have been in the hands of a score of men belonging to those Pioneer Brothers of whom you have heard me speak. One of them chanced to see me as I rode toward the fort this morning, and a number of them were waiting for me at the Middle Rock as I came back."

"And they took you prisoner, papa?"

"Yes. They surrounded me so quickly that I could neither fight nor fly. What did they want? They have heard rumors or had positive statements concerning my discoveries, and are ready to tear me to pieces if necessary to wrest my secret from me! They are encamped on the Pine Slope, near the spot where I shot that last brown bear. They took me there, threatened me and questioned me, and finally shut me up, but I found means to escape, as I will relate at my leisure. And you, my child," he added, turning his glances solicitously upon her pale features. "How have you been in my absence?"

Ere Nettie could reply, there came through the still air of the night from an open space not a hundred yards away the command:

"Halt!"

"Ah, new arrivals!" exclaimed the hermit, with a flush of joy. "I understand the matter. Wait here a moment!"

He hurried away in the direction from which that command had come, but was soon back again, pleased and relieved.

"It's as I supposed!" he reported. "A whole company of soldiers has been mustered out of the service to-day, and they've come here in charge of their old commander, a fine young fellow named Dawson, who resigned a couple of weeks ago!"

"But what have they come here for?"

"Why, to search for gold! Some fact or rumor of my discoveries has reached them, and here they are, to take part in the grand struggle to share my good fortune!"

"How do you know this?"

"From a little address I heard Captain Dawson making to them. 'Although we are out of the service,' he was saying to them, 'we are in a region where we may look for many enemies and perils, and the wisest thing we can do is to preserve our military organization, all sticking together, going into camp regularly, mounting guard, and so forth.' He added that the chances of finding gold in these hills would be greatly increased by taking this course!"

"It seems, then, that your secret is now becoming public property, papa?" murmured Nettie, anxiously.

"As you see, Nettie! This company of soldiers makes the fourth party of gold-seekers which has come to my knowledge since morning! I came very near being arrested at the fort on a trumped-up charge by Natt Garry and a number of confederates, and I have no doubt that Lippman and a few of his intimates have also joined in the chase!"

"Why, at this rate, we shall soon be in trouble, papa," exclaimed Nettie, more anxiously than before. "What are we to do?"

"We must take counsel with each other, my child," replied the gold-finder, "and come to an instant decision. Did I not hear Ned's salute as I arrived?"

"You did, papa."

"Where is he?"

"In that little dell in front of the cave!"

"Let me fetch him, and we'll hasten homeward!"

The couple were soon in motion, leading their horses.

"And now to tell me what has befallen you in my absence," suggested the hermit, "for I see that you are strangely preoccupied and excited, and can only suppose that you have something very serious on your mind."

"Such is indeed the case, papa!"

And with this frank avowal, she en-

tered upon a rapid resume of her adventures with Campus.

How terribly these revelations startled the gold-finder need not be stated.

By the time the couple had reached their abode, the hermit was in possession of the principal particulars of Nettie's dealings with the redskin, and his first measure was to look into the pavilion where the maiden had left him.

To their intense astonishment, he had vanished!

"Perhaps he has got away with our gold, papa!" gasped Nettie.

She hastened to lead the way to the spot to which she had removed it.

One glance was enough!

The gold, too, was gone!

CHAPTER XXII.

REDSKINS IN COUNCIL.

What had happened?

Simply this:

Not long after dark, as Campus lay on the lounge in the pavilion, where Nettie had left him, as helpless as a mummy in its sarcophagus, he heard a stealthy footstep on an adjacent walk, and readily detected that it was coming nearer and nearer.

And as that conviction took possession of his soul, he looked as uncomfortable as if a kettle of boiling water had been poured over him.

For that stealthy footstep was so much in his own line that he did not hesitate a moment to ascribe it to one of his own people.

And if to one of his own people, very naturally also to an enemy, after the confidences he had given Nettie.

Holding his breath and listening, Campus waited and noted progress until he was sure that the objective point of the intruder was the pavilion, and then his apprehensions forced him to speak.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Abe Brooker," was the answer.

"Who are you?"

Campus hesitated.

It was no easy thing, in his bound and helpless condition, to reveal his identity to a deadly enemy, but a few reflections led him to conclude that he had more to fear from the hermit and his daughter than from the new-comer.

"I'm Campus," he avowed.

"Well, your voice don't sound like it! What Campus? Some new chick of Father Camp? Or are you really—"

"Yes, I am Horatio Campus, who shot you, Abe, day before yesterday!"

A brief silence succeeded.

"Well, what's your little game now?" then demanded Abe Brooker. "What are you doing in that place? Are you waiting to get another shot at me?"

"No; I am bound hand and foot, Abe, so that I cannot move," explained the prisoner. "I have been in this fix since noon, and am nearly dead of thirst and fatigue. That is why my voice sounds so strange to you. Come in here and see me."

The new-comer did not seem to be wholly at ease about the occupant of the pavilion, but he finally asked:

"Will it be safe for me to strike a match and look at you?"

"Yes. There's no one near us."

Abe Brooker accordingly lighted a match, and availed himself of its flame to look through one of the latticed sides of the pavilion at the prisoner.

"Sure enough," he muttered, with a sigh of relief, as darkness resumed its sway. "How came you in such a fix?"

"An old hermit and his daughter, who live here, gave me some sort of drug with my dinner, and bound me in this way when I was asleep and helpless."

"What for?"

"To rob me of a lot of gold I have found since I left the village."

"How much gold?"

"Well, there's about a ton of it."

"A ton of gold, Campus!"

"Yes, Abe. And there's tons more to be had for picking it up. It's nearly all in nuggets."

"Really, Campus? Are you serious?" queried Abe Brooker, with a startled and wondering air.

"Serious? Of course I am," returned the prisoner. "Would a man in such a fix as this have any reasons for lying?"

"Wait a moment. I'll call Ally and Emily."

A bird-like call succeeded, twice repeated, and a couple of figures appeared beside Abe Brooker, one of them a woman.

"What do you think?" questioned Abe. "In this pavilion lies Horatio Campus, bound in such a network of ropes that he cannot lift a finger. How did he come here? Listen!"

The statements Campus had made were repeated to the new-comers.

"Let's see him," then came in a pleasant, musical voice. "Haven't you a light or anything to make one?"

"Nothing better than a match," answered Abe Brooker.

"You can find a candle in the house," said Campus, "on a shelf near the door as you enter."

The candle was soon found and lighted, and the three new-comers entered the pavilion.

They were brothers and sister.

The former were two young bucks not far from twenty, who might have been twins, to judge by the resemblance between them, but who were probably separated by eighteen months or two years.

They were comely, shapely fellows, and models of strength and agility.

The sister was a year or two younger than the youngest of her brothers, and was really a beauty.

All were dressed with taste and elegance—the brothers in suits which had been procured for them by Father Camp, and which would not have been out of place in New York or London, while the sister looked as if she had just stepped from some cosmopolitan stage, so jaunty was her hat, so elegant her short skirts and robe, and so becoming and tasty were all her belongings, even to her gloves and high-laced boots.

As attested by all these facts and circumstances, the trio were the especial favorites of Father Camp, who had devoted many years to their education, and we must even affirm that they were fine specimens—as far as externals go—of the results which are occasionally obtained from the labors of our missionaries and fort chaplains.

Under these externals, however, could have easily been found at any time the inborn and inalienable characteristics of their species.

"Well, you are in a bad way," said Abe Brooker, after he had flashed his light over the face and form before him. "See, Emily, how these cords have cut into his wrists. He has evidently been making desperate efforts to free himself."

"For the simple reason that I feared I should die here," avowed Campus. "But how glad I am to see that none of you were killed by my bullets. I can hardly realize it."

"And yet nothing is more natural," explained Ally Brooker. "The shot which struck me merely stunned me, glancing from my skull and plowing a furrow in my hair. The one you gave Emily was deflected by the steel in her corset, and passed around her instead of through her. In a word, with that gash on your cheek, you cannot be said to have had the best of the scrimmage."

Ally Brooker had begun using a knife when he began to talk, and by the time he finished the remarks we have recorded Campus was again in possession of his freedom.

"Thank you, Ally," he said, offering his hand to the trio in rapid succession. "I shall never forget this kindness, Emily. I am very sorry I was such a villain as to be jealous of you, and such a fool as to yield to a passing fancy for that white girl, Isabella Camp. I can realize now that you had nothing to do with her sudden departure from the village. In a word, I am very sorry for all those mis-

takes and the violence that resulted from them, and beg to be forgiven and restored to my former footing."

Every one of these words had operated like a magnet to draw Emily Brooker toward the speaker, and by the time he had finished her arms were around him and her head nestled on his bosom.

"If you can forgive us, Horatio," she declared, "after what you have suffered at our hands, we shall never recall what you have done to us, since none of us was seriously injured. Let all that has been amiss be forgotten."

"Then let us talk and act rapidly," proposed Campus, as he led the way from the pavilion and bent a keen glance around him. "I was speaking of gold. The rumor which has been heard in our village is based upon a reality. I have already found enough to make us all independent. Let me have the light, and I'll soon recover my stolen treasure."

Confiding in Nettie's declaration that she had removed the treasure, and knowing that at least twenty trips would be required for such a movement, the crafty redskin did not have the least doubt of being able to find the trail she had left behind her.

"Ah, here we are," he exclaimed, as he caught a glimpse of a well-worn runway across the corner of a flower-bed between the pavilion and the stable. "Let me take the lead."

The redskin did not have the least difficulty in following the girl's tracks across the garden, and scarcely any in tracing her route into the depths of the woods, the very rustling of the leaves under her feet having left a well-defined indication of her movements.

In due course, therefore, the sagacious redskin, with the aid of his long experience on the trails of his friends and enemies, arrived at the spot where Nettie had left the treasure and called the attention of his friends to it with a very howl of triumph.

"You see?" he cried. "And you will now begin to comprehend what a career is opening before us. It's red against white, and red's sure to win! Let's get away with this gold to some snug retreat within a mile of here, where we can pass the night in comfort and be ready to do great things to-morrow."

The first measure of the redskins was to remove the gold to a short distance so that it would be beyond the knowledge of Nettie and her father. Then they gave it a second movement, followed by a third, and in due course reached a hiding-place at such a distance from the hermit's that they had no further fear of being seen or followed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DESPERATE STATE OF THINGS.

The regrets of Wind-River Clark at the loss of his gold were intense.

Nevertheless, after all the dangers its possession had gathered around him, and especially in view of the fierce efforts that were being made at present and likely to continue for his capture and robbery, there was a "reverse to the medal."

"I am very sorry, Nettie," he at length said, with forced calmness, "that all my arduous toils of so many months have been negatived and reduced to naught. In this case, however, as in nearly all others, it's easy to see that it might have been worse."

"How so, papa?"

"Why, that Horatio Campus is one of the most dangerous reprobates in the whole territory. I have seen him repeatedly at the fort, where he is always drinking, gambling, fighting and horse-racing. He is generally accompanied by those Brooker brothers, who seem to be his congenial spirits, and I have heard it said that he is engaged to the Brooker girl."

"Ah! that accounts for what he said to me, papa," exclaimed Nettie. "He told me that he had shot the two Brooker boys, and their sister, and he ex-

pressed a fear that they might find him at any moment, as they had been in pursuit of him, from all of which I readily understood that a violent quarrel had arisen between them."

"Yes, that is what has happened," declared the hermit, "but that is not all. As you have seen, the prisoner did not free himself, but was released by some friend, who cut his bonds with a knife. The most likely view of the case is that the Brookers and their sister found Campus as he lay helpless in the pavilion. As you had left him the use of his tongue, he was able to tell a good story, and had no difficulty in making his peace with the new-comers. In fact, from what you have told me of his injuries, he is likely to have suffered quite as much as the Brookers from the quarrel, and all of them would readily find a thousand reasons for 'burying the hatchet.'"

"This is what has been done then," commented Nettie. "And peace and harmony having been thus restored, Campus has spoken of the gold, and it may have been no great task for them to track me to this spot, as I had to make many trips, and especially as I was too excited and too pressed for time to take suitable precautions. The only consolation is, papa, that I have saved all the money—"

"You have, my child?" interrupted the hermit, with the keenest joy. "Where is it?"

"In that cave near which you found me. I have not only saved all the gold coin and greenbacks, but also quite a quantity of the nuggets—all I could carry away, in fact, on Ned's back!"

"Bravo!" commented the hermit, in a tone and with a mien of inexpressible relief. "Our financial situation is not so bad, after all. If we can get out of the Wind River Valley with all that cash and even a sample of our nuggets, we shall be able to build ourselves a new home and pass the remainder of our days in comfort. In the course of the next few hours we must tie up our treasure in convenient parcels and make an attempt to reach a place of safety with it."

"Speaking of parcels, papa, what has become of the supplies you intended to bring from the fort?" asked Nettie.

"I was robbed of them by Captain Harvester, of the Pioneer Brothers."

"And your money?"

"The captain took that also."

"A dubious sort of 'pioneer,' I should think. He of course took your rifle?"

"It has at least fallen into his hands, as I left it in a corner of his tent."

"Have those men any idea where we live, papa?"

"Naturally, having seen me going and coming in the ravine which leads from the Sage Creek Valley."

"Then they may soon be here?"

"Within an hour as likely as not."

The girl looked startled.

"We have no time to lose, therefore," resumed the hermit, as he turned to lead the way back to the cottage, with an air as thoughtful as serious. "Those men are like wolves. The greed of gold has crazed their brains to such an extent that they would not hesitate a moment to tie us both to a spit and roast us alive before a fire, in order to exact from me the whereabouts of my placer."

"Well, if the worse were to come, you could tell them, I suppose?" murmured Nettie, after a pause.

"No, my child!"

"But why not, papa? Better to lose the secret than your life."

"Ay! there's the rub! The truth is, Nettie, I don't know where the great central field of this gold region is. I have skirmished all about it, so to speak; I have even made wonderful discoveries; I have gathered a large quantity of gold, in fact; but all this has been done by patient toil, and not by one of those lucky strokes which make a man a millionaire in a minute."

"You think, then, that you have only gathered a portion of the scattering gold in this field, papa, and that there are still greater discoveries to come?"

"Yes, child—that's the very idea. I have no doubt of the existence of gold in such quantities, within a score of miles of us, that all I have found can be regarded only as a sample in comparison with it!"

The maiden seemed lost in wonder.

"I may add that I have a suspicion where there is a vast deposit of gold," pursued the hermit, "and it was my intention to examine this spot to-morrow. As it is, I am paralyzed—completely disheartened."

The couple had now reached the cottage, and the gold-finder seated himself on the veranda with the air of a man who is too beset and badgered to know which way to turn.

"As I said," he soon remarked, "the case might be worse. That Campus might have burned the house and stable, and either murdered you or carried you off with him. I tremble at the mere thought of the risks you have run in my absence, and comprehend only too vividly that I must never leave you again. Possibly Captain Harvester and his men may not be here till daylight, as the discovery of the ravine by no means implies a discovery of our retreat, but we must not take the chances of waiting. We must reach some instant decision."

"Then why not apply to Captain Dawson for assistance?" suggested Nettie. "Is he not an honest and honorable man?"

"Most assuredly," replied the hermit. "Every word I have ever heard in regard to him has been in his favor. His father was one of the best of our late frontier generals and Indian-fighters, and has left his wife and son a handsome fortune. I saw the lady herself, some ten days ago, as she was riding out with her son, and was very much struck by her appearance. Her great, sad eyes seemed to announce such an unrest and loneliness that they haunted me for days afterward. She has been stopping near the fort for several weeks past, and I understand that she was here to accompany her son to a new home on the Pacific Slope."

"Well, papa, if Captain Dawson is such a nice man, and is so well connected," exclaimed Nettie, emphatically, "I think we ought to appeal to him for protection immediately, and use him as a counter against all those ruffians of whom you have been speaking."

The suggestion appeared to go straight to the heart and brain of the hermit.

"You are right, child," he declared, as he sprung to his feet. "Hand me out a shirt and that civilian suit—it seems that I can no longer figure as a solitary hermit—and I will improve my appearance a little, and hasten to pay Captain Dawson a visit."

He ran to the brook and washed the blood from his scratched hands and face, and then hastened back to the cottage, entering his bed-room, and proceeded to make his toilet, donning a neat black suit which he had not worn more than twice in half a dozen years, and then only in the presence of his daughter.

When he again presented himself to Nettie, she could not help looking admiringly at him.

"I shall be glad, papa," she said, "if you will never return to those skins again."

"Well, I don't know why I should," he replied, since we are evidently fated to be driven out of the wilderness and forced to take refuge in the haunts of civilization."

"May I not trim your hair and beard a little, papa?"

"Certainly, if you think the proceeding will make me more presentable."

The maiden was busy at this task when the light of a lantern suddenly fell upon her gaze, and footsteps re-

sounded on the walk just without the door.

The scissors fell from her hand.

"Oh, papa!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RIGHT MAN AT THE RIGHT MOMENT.

The gold-finder was nearly as much startled as his daughter, but soon sprung from the chair in which she had placed him for the convenience of the "trimming" she was giving him, and ran to the door.

"Good-evening, Mr. Clark," greeted a fine, manly voice, as the light of the new-comer's lantern flashed upon the hermit's face, at the same time revealing his own.

"Ah, Captain Dawson!" returned the hermit, after a single moment of bewilderment. "This is a most glorious surprise! I am delighted to see you!"

He crossed the veranda with the celerity inspired by his great joy and relief, and offered his hand.

"The pleasure is reciprocated, sir," returned the captain, as he shook the hand of the hermit warmly, "and I trust you will pardon the liberty I have taken of intruding upon you at such an unseasonable hour."

"Your presence is not at all an intrusion, captain, but entirely to the contrary," assured the gold-finder, with a flush of delight and relief. "Come in! come in!"

Nettie had listened to these remarks—with what joy need not be stated—and hastened to light her father and the captain into the cottage with the candle she had previously been using.

"This is my daughter, captain," said the hermit, by way of an introduction, as the eyes of the visitor encountered the bright, glowing face of Nettie.

The captain inclined his tall, commanding figure profoundly, at the same time bestowing upon the blushing girl one of those admiring, respectful glances which go so directly to the feminine heart.

"This is indeed a pleasure, Miss Clark," he said, as he advanced quickly and possessed himself of the hand Nettie was almost too timid to offer him, "and it's all the more gratifying to me because I have so long admired you from a distance!"

"Of course, Nettie, you understand who our visitor is," added the hermit, smilingly, as he turned to his daughter. "He's the very man of whom we were speaking at the moment of his arrival—Captain Alfred Dawson!"

"I understood as much, papa, from the very instant you spoke to him," declared the maiden, as she placed her candle on the table, while her father handed a chair toward the visitor. "Some good angel must have sent him!"

"Sit down, Captain Dawson," added the hermit, "and excuse the lack of a fire. My daughter and I have both been absent the most of the day, and have just come back to the cottage."

The captain accepted the proffered chair, but not till he had turned a further glance upon Nettie's face, as a sort of response to her latest remark, and not without a rosy flush of gratification.

He was as fine a specimen of manhood as one could meet in a day's journey, even in the Wild West, where heroes of the rarest type are so common.

His age could not have been less than twenty-five years, but he looked somewhat younger than that, as if he had taken life easily, and was still of a sunny and boyish disposition; yet there was no mistaking the gleam of his steel-blue eyes, or the stern, fearless outlines of his face, or the vigor and agility displayed in his movements.

"It seems, then, that you have done me the honor of speaking of me before I appeared here in person," said the visitor, with a pleasant smile, as his glances alternated between the father and daughter. "I presume from this

fact that you were aware of my presence in this neighborhood?"

"Such is the case, sir," replied the hermit. "I happened to be near enough to see you going into camp, and hear the good advice you gave your men!"

"Then I may consider that we have broken the ice, as the saying is, and that we shall have no difficulty in becoming better acquainted!"

As the captain said this, his eyes came back to Nettie's face with such a pleading, deprecating sort of a gaze that she could not help becoming rosier than ever.

It is scarcely necessary to pause here to say how much and how deeply she was already interested in him, and what a relief it was to feel that he would protect her father and herself against all the perils by which they were menaced.

"Your presence here certainly affords us great relief, Captain Dawson," assured the hermit, after bowing a pleasant assent to the visitor's latest observation. "If I were to talk all night, I could not begin to tell you how pleased we are to see you!"

The captain bowed low, with a long sigh of relief.

"With such kindly assurances as these," he continued, "I need not hesitate a moment longer to avow the causes and circumstances which have incited me to take this liberty. While not a professional gold-seeker, or even a transient prospector, I have nevertheless long had a suspicion that gold exists in these hills and valleys, and for a year or two past I have given a great deal of my leisure time to a search for it. I will even add that I have found it."

He produced a small bag of nuggets, which he opened and displayed on the table, inviting the father and daughter by a gesture to examine them.

"They are certainly very fine," commented the hermit, after a brief examination of the specimens. "How far back do your discoveries of gold in this neighborhood extend?"

"About a year and a half."

"Then I must say that you are ahead of myself in the business," acknowledged the hermit, with a smile. "The first of my discoveries are hardly so old. Have you covered a large field with your prospecting?"

"Well, yes."

"And have not found anywhere an extensive deposit?"

"No, sir."

"I see that our experiences have been very much alike, captain," observed the hermit, "and I regret that we did not become acquainted sooner. You must have often seen me in this vicinity as you came and went?"

"On several occasions—yes, if not exactly often."

"Then why didn't you reveal yourself to me?" demanded the hermit.

"Well, Mr. Clark, I knew you only as a man who had fled from his fellow-beings, under the pressure of some great disgust or misery, and I was afraid you would regard any advances of the sort as an intrusion and annoyance."

"Oh, assuredly not. You seem to have been aware of the whereabouts of this cottage?"

"For at least a couple of years past—yes, sir. I will even frankly say that I came here one afternoon a few weeks ago, with the intention of comparing notes with you about our discoveries."

"Indeed? Then how does it happen that we did not see you?"

"You were out riding, sir—in fact, both of you, as was indicated by a couple of tracks leading from your little stable—and I was too much hurried to wait. My intention was to make another attempt in a day or two, but one thing or another has adjourned this purpose until the present moment."

"I regret the delay, sir," declared the hermit, with a sincerity which admitted of no question, "and must content myself with the hope that our future deal-

ings will indemnify me for the loss. You are now out of the army, captain?"

"And expect to remain so. The truth is, my mother is getting to be almost an invalid, and I feel more and more every day the necessity of devoting my time to her."

"Is she still at the fort?"

"Yes, sir; or rather with some esteemed friends of ours who have a lovely home just outside of the fortifications."

"I should think she would find life in these solitudes rather irksome than otherwise, Captain Dawson," remarked Nettie, who had been closely following the conversation between the visitor and her father.

"And so she would, no doubt, Miss Clark, under ordinary circumstances," responded the captain, as a shadow invaded his fine features. "but there was a terrible tragedy in our home which has warped my mother's mind into a very strange if not a morbid state."

"Ah! in what way?" breathed Nettie, with sudden interest.

"Many years ago, when I was a mere boy," explained the captain, "my only sister was stolen from our home by a band of hostiles, and she has never been recovered. She was a mere child at the time, not having completed her third year, but that fact only intensified the anguish of my mother, whose whole life became a torture at the thought that her only little girl—who was her living image—would grow up to womanhood in the wigwams of the savages, and never know anything of the fond, sorrowing parents from whom she had been so ruthlessly torn."

"Poor girl!" murmured Nettie, as a flood of sympathetic tears welled up into her eyes. "I am very sorry for you, Captain Dawson, and for your lost sister, as also for your parents. And you have never known her fate?"

"Never!" replied Captain Dawson, with a sigh that seemed torn from his heart. "But the search for our lost Isabella—for such was her name—has been the one great aim of our lives. It would take volumes to detail the clues we have followed, the vain quests which have occupied us, the travels and explorations we have made along the whole frontier, from Dakota to Texas. In the later years of his life my father lost heart and hope for the search, and often said to us that our lost Isabella must have long since been numbered with the dead, and there were even moments when he hoped and prayed that such might be the case."

CHAPTER XXV.

A LION IN THE WAY.

The hermit and Nettie bowed understandingly, the latter unable to restrain her tears, which deluged her cheeks like rain.

"While the views of my father took the despairing hues I have indicated," continued the young captain, "those of my mother have as steadily grown in the opposite direction. She not only believes that my sister still lives, but that we shall some day find her. I entered the army because she felt that the step would increase my facilities for looking for our lost one, and she has come to the frontier herself for the same reason."

"Yet you hear nothing, captain, to warrant your mother's hopefulness?" queried Nettie.

"No, we do not," answered the captain, "and I must say that I am inclined to give up the search, inasmuch as I see that the worry and excitement it is causing my mother is bringing her rapidly to her grave. She has reached that point that she can neither eat nor sleep, except in a fragmentary sort of way, and I realize only too keenly that a few months more of this unrest and yearning will rob me of my mother."

"I wish I could make your mother's acquaintance, Captain Dawson," said Nettie, with an earnest and sympathetic interest that touched the captain deeply. "I feel as if I could be a great comfort to her."

"A thousand thanks for the generous suggestion, Miss Clark," returned the young captain, as his noble face flushed eloquently with his gratitude. "The very first ride my mother takes in any direction shall be to come to you."

"In the meantime," pursued Nettie, as a sweet confusion caused her to cast down her glances, "I would like you to explain a remark you made at the moment of your arrival. I allude to the phrase in which you spoke of having long admired me from a distance. May I ask what you meant?"

"Certainly. I simply meant that this is not the first time I have looked upon your charming face, nor the second!"

"Why, what do you mean? Hear him, papa! What can be the meaning of this riddle?"

"He simply means, I suspect," replied the hermit, as he looked from one confused countenance to the other, "that he has seen you more than once, as he paused to take a drink from the brook, or as he passed near on his way to his gold-fields or on his return from them."

"Yes, that is substantially what I mean," avowed Captain Dawson, "although I must add, in all frankness, that I have lingered hereabouts, for hours at a time, in the hopes of getting a glimpse of you."

"And were you so anxious to see me?" inquired Nettie, archly, as she half-bid her blushing behind a newspaper she had picked up from the table.

"I can do no less than acknowledge the fact, now that I find myself cornered," returned the captain.

"Then why didn't you come to the house and ask for me?"

"For two reasons, Nettie, if I may call you by the name which has been cherished in my innermost soul for many months past," explained the visitor, with a smiling seriousness which had a strange charm for his fair hearer. "I was afraid of your father—afraid he would repulse me—afraid he would consider it the height of meanness for me to come here with some vague and unconfessed idea of robbing him of his daughter. Then, too, Nettie, I was afraid of you."

"Of me! What an idea! How can you say such a thing?" cried Nettie, all in a breath. "Why afraid of me?"

"Because I thought you so retiring, so fairylike, so unused to seeing any one, so afraid of the sorrows and crimes of the great world beyond these solitudes, that you would fly at my approach, and that the end would be for me despair and misery!"

"Why, what an idea!" murmured Nettie, as her lovely face passed into complete eclipse behind the newspaper. "Did you ever hear anything like it, papa? And don't you think it was very, very naughty to come here, time after time, and 'admire' me from behind some tree or stone, and not give me the least little bit of a chance to return the compliment?"

"Well, yes—the captain is certainly to blame in that respect," declared the hermit, "but I am inclined to think he has been the greatest loser from that proceeding, and that he now deeply regrets it."

"I do, indeed!" avowed the captain. "More than any words can tell you. If I had been true to myself, I should have come to you months ago, and taken you by the hand, and said:

"Darling Nettie, I love you!"

"Oh, how sorry I am I didn't take that course!"

The sweet face came out from behind its eclipse, and a pair of tender eyes looked into the depths of the captain's soul, while a quivering, glad voice murmured:

"Perhaps it's not yet too late to say something of the sort, Captain Dawson, if papa has no objections. What do you think of him, papa?"

"Well, I must candidly say," replied the hermit, "that he appears to me to be one of the best and noblest of men. He has made a mistake, to be sure, in not speaking to us sooner, but he has very candidly given the reasons for his abstention, and I must say that they are wholly to his credit. As a general thing, that love which is timid and apprehensive, and which hardly dares to hope for a return, may be regarded as the purest and noblest of affections!"

"Many thanks, Mr. Clark," exclaimed Capt. Dawson, "for this kindly construction of my conduct, which is simply a recognition of the exact truth in the case. If I have been slow to declare myself, it is because I realized how much I had at stake, and could not bear the thought of seeing my hopes turn to ashes."

He arose suddenly, throwing himself at the maiden's feet, and resuming possession of the hand he had clasped so lingeringly at the moment of his arrival.

"And now, Nettie," he said, with a pale and agitated face, "let me tell you what has to-day brought me to your feet. Not merely the fact that I love you so deeply and tenderly, but also the fact that you are in danger. During the last few days the story of your father's discoveries has been convulsing scores of minds in this neighborhood, and already a small army is turning its steps in this direction! Not only is your father's secret in danger, but so also is his life, and yours! White, black, and red; outlaws and fugitives; Pioneer Brothers and deputy sheriffs; sutlers and ex-cavalrymen—half a dozen different parties, more or less known to me, are already moving in this direction, and all of them are agreed to capture your father and put him to torture, if necessary, in order to wrest from him the secret of his gold discoveries. Not only is he in danger, dear Nettie, but so also are you! Your existence and presence in this solitude is already known to a score of ruffians of the most unscrupulous and deadly description, and they would not hesitate a moment to reach your father and his secret through you!"

The hand he held tightened upon his own as if it would never more be separated from it, and the eyes looking into his own beamed with a tender radiance which told how entirely the young captain filled out the ideal of the maiden's dreams!

"What are we to do, Alfred?" she asked.

"I have already taken action," replied the captain, hurriedly. "The most of the men I have brought with me are true and tried friends. They are here, to be sure, as gold-seekers, and with the assurance that your father and I will give them a chance in the ball that's now opening, but, above and beyond all that, they are here, as I am, Nettie, to defend you and your father with their lives!"

"And here they come!" exclaimed the hermit, as a body of mounted men burst out of the adjacent woods into the lawn, lighting their way with torches. "What joy to see them!"

With a startled and puzzled air, Captain Dawson ran to the door and looked out.

"They are not my men," he whispered, as he turned back to the father and daughter. "They must be one of the bands looking for you!"

The hermit hastened to look from the door.

"Sure enough!" he reported. "They are the Pioneer Brothers!"

He was not mistaken!

He had recognized the grim faces of Captain Harvester and Lieutenant Moonlight in the glow of their torches, as they rode at the head of their men!

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTAIN HARVESTER'S RECEPTION.

As is shown by the very promptness of their arrival, the Pioneer Brothers had experienced no great difficulty in making their way to the retreat of the hermit.

The track left by his horse, as it galloped at such a furious pace through the forest, was in itself enough to have rendered pursuit easy and certain.

"Yes, this is the place, beyond all doubt," Captain Harvester was saying, as the hermit looked from his door, as related. "We've run him to his hole. Take half a dozen men and surround the house as soon as you can, Mr. Moonlight, before any of its inmates have a chance to escape."

The lieutenant hastened to carry out the suggestion.

"Lively, now, boys," added Harvester, after a glance into the pavilion to assure himself that no enemy was lurking within. "Pile up some of the hermit's wood in two or three piles, and touch it off, that we may have light enough to see what we are doing."

His followers were so prompt in the execution of this order, that the clearing was soon lighted up with the brilliancy of noonday.

"There! now, stand to your shooting-irons," added the captain, "and be ready to shoot or capture anybody who may come out of that cottage."

He waited long enough to see that the bulk of his men were in favorable positions, and then sauntered up to the door of the house, which was now closed, and knocked loudly upon it, after a vain attempt to open it.

"Let us in, Mr. Clark, and be quick about it," he commanded, with an air which showed how contented he was with his prospects. "Open the door, or we shall burst it from its hinges!"

"That would not be quite so easy a job as you seem to imagine, Captain Harvester," returned the hermit, as he opened a small sliding panel in the door, and looked out upon the outlaw leader. "This house was not built without due reference to its situation and the people around it, and the door is stouter than it looks."

"In any case, open it, and say no more about it," enjoined the leader of the Pioneer Brothers, impatiently.

"A word first," said the hermit, with a submissive mien. "If I let you in, I'd like you to come alone, that I may talk to you in confidence, and without sharing every dollar I possess with the members of your band."

"That is quite in my line," returned the outlaw leader, lowering his tone to a whisper, and looking around to be sure that none of his men were within hearing. "If you are ready to deal with me, you will find that I know when I'm well treated."

"All right. Come in."

The hermit opened the door, giving the visitor admittance, and then closing the door behind him.

"Ah, you are not alone here?" exclaimed the intruder, with a keen glance around him which took in the hermit's daughter, to whom he bowed with exaggerated politeness.

"No, captain," returned the hermit. "The young lady is my daughter."

He advanced a chair for the use of his persecutor and added:

"Please be seated."

The outlaw complied, looking around again with an appreciative glance in which a great deal of surprise was apparent.

"I had no suspicion, Mr. Clark," he remarked, "that you resided in this curious sort of pocket, or that you had been at the trouble of building such a very comfortable house. You have been here a long time?"

The hermit assented.

"It would be a thousand pities if you were to provoke me to deal with you as an enemy," pursued the outlaw captain, as his glances came back to Nettie's face. "I would prefer to be your friend. Let's

see if we cannot come to an understanding. I hear that you have found gold to the amount of several hundred thousand dollars. Is such the case?"

"I will not deny it."

The eyes of Captain Harvester gleamed at the acknowledgment, and he drew his chair nearer to that of the hermit, who had in the meantime sat down.

"Then why shouldn't there be a treaty of peace and friendship between us?" he continued, assuming a confidential air. "I am in a position to give you and Miss Clark the protection you so greatly need, and you, in return, can share with me the treasure you have already found, and tell me where as much more can be had for the asking."

"Certainly, such an arrangement would have its advantages," remarked the hermit—"especially for you."

The intruder drew his chair a step nearer and sunk his voice still lower:

"In good truth," he resumed, as his gaze came back to Nettie, "I do not see what there is to prevent me from aspiring to the hand of your charming daughter. To be sure my reputation is not exactly that of a saint, but I dare say yours is not much better, if we should get down to its bottom facts, or you would not have been willing to take refuge in such an outcast corner of creation as you actually occupy. Upon these and similar considerations I think it would be wise and nice all around, Mr. Clark, for you to take me into partnership with you in gold-seeking and all other matters, with the understanding that I am to become your son-in-law as soon as the young lady has had a chance to become acquainted with me."

"There's one little objection to the acceptance of your proposition, Captain Harvester," replied the hermit, quietly.

"What is it?"

"Look over your shoulder."

The outlaw captain acted upon the hint and the gesture with which it was accompanied, and found no less than three revolvers within a few inches of his head.

"If you stir an inch, John Hinckley, till I give you permission, your life isn't worth a tallow-dip," said Captain Dawson, who held one of the three weapons.

"Do you comprehend me?"

The outlaw leader nodded.

"Then hold out your hands."

Captain Harvester complied, and the hermit snapped a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists.

"This step will tell you, John Hinckley," pursued the young captain, "that your career as 'Captain Harvester' has come to an untimely end. Or, if you have the least doubt on the subject, take a look at these warrants."

He thrust three formidable-looking documents under the nose of the prisoner.

"What are they?" he asked.

"One is for the murder of Peter Griffin in his own house because he wouldn't lead you to the hiding-place of his money," explained Captain Dawson, with a voice as stern as that of an accusing angel. "The second is for arson in the night time, and the third for ditching a train, thus killing an engineer and fireman. These three crimes being all punishable with death, it is needless to say that your chance of escaping the gallows is a very poor one!"

The despairing villain roused himself with the intention of calling his men to his aid, but the movement had been duly foreseen, and in a few moments more he was gagged and bound securely.

"The next step is to capture his lieutenant," remarked Captain Dawson, as his two assistants deposited the prisoner in one of the adjoining rooms. "Will you invite him in, Mr. Clark?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE YOUNG CAPTAIN'S VICTORY.

Nodding assent, the hermit stepped to the door and beckoned to Mr. Moonlight, who was on the watch at the nearest corner of the house.

Smiling with contentment and believing that all the splendid anticipations of his leader were about to be realized, the lieutenant hastened to enter the cottage, where he was instantly confronted by Captain Dawson and his two aids.

"Do you know me, Willett?" asked the young captain.

The lieutenant started as if shot, at hearing his real name pronounced so unexpectedly, but soon stammered:

"Certainly. You are Captain Dawson, late of Company D of the 8th. What's up? How is it—"

"Oh, as simple as kissing," interrupted the young captain, as he poked the muzzle of his revolver under the gaze of the startled lieutenant. "The good people of this Territory have had enough of you, as of John Hinckley, otherwise Harvester, and several warrants have been lodged with me for your arrest. Will you bow gracefully to the inevitable? If so, hold out your hands!"

The villain hesitated only a moment.

Like his chief, he comprehended that Captain Dawson had nearly a hundred men within call, and he knew that any attempt at resistance would result in instant disaster.

He was quickly handcuffed and then gagged and bound.

"Take the pair of them to the cellar and leave them there till further orders," was the next command of Captain Dawson, as he resigned the prisoners to the care of his two coadjutors, who were his orderly and second sergeant. "Place a single man in charge of them!"

Stepping out into the garden, the young captain bent a keen glance around him.

"In the name of Captain Harvester," he called, in a loud voice, "let all the Pioneer Brothers rally around me instantly."

The appeal was duly responded to, and nearly a score of men were soon gathered around the young commander. "I dare say some of you know who I am," he remarked, as he bent a smiling glance upon the new-comers.

"He's Captain Dawson, of the Regulars," cried one of the Pioneer Brothers, "but I'm blest if I know what he's doing with us!"

"Then I will tell you," pursued the young officer. "You may not all be aware that the real name of your captain is John Hinckley, while that of your lieutenant is Willett. It's possible, too, that you may not be aware that these two men have long been wanted by the authorities for very serious offenses. Be that as it may, I have the pleasure of informing you that these two fugitives from justice have now been arrested, and will never have a chance to give you any further orders!"

His hearers thrilled with consternation, and glared around as if to see from which quarter lightning was about to strike them.

"As to you, one and all," resumed Captain Dawson, with smiling serenity, "you had better get back to your headquarters on Owl Creek just as soon as you can."

"But the gold?" ventured one of the most daring of his hearers.

"Well, there is some gold hereabouts," returned Captain Dawson, "but I would not advise any of you to go looking for it with rifles in your hands. I will give you one of my reasons."

He uttered a peculiar call, and that instant nearly a hundred men started up from all directions around him.

"These are my men," pursued the young captain, with a wave of the hand, "and a glance at them will probably convince any Pioneer Brother that gold is not to be sought hereabouts at the muzzle of a rifle!"

The silence that succeeded was unmistakably a silence of consternation.

"What are we to do, captain?" asked the previous speaker, but in a voice so changed that his identity narrowly escaped being ignored.

"You are to go back to Owl Creek, and remain there until you can make up your

minds to stake off a claim and take your chances at honest labor. All of you thus inclined can report to me at this spot a week hence. In the meantime, there are many reasons why this is no place for you, especially for such men as Griff and Moxley. You can go."

There was no necessity of repeating the permission. The Pioneer Brothers hastened pell-mell to the spot where they had left their horses, and were soon tearing away as rapidly as their torchlight permitted, the most of them rejoicing that they had not received the same discriminating attention which had overtaken their leaders.

Standing near one of the fires the Pioneer Brothers had kindled, Captain Dawson remained motionless a few moments, with his hands to the blaze, and then he turned a smiling and comprehensive glance upon his men.

"I hardly think I shall need your services again till morning," he declared, "and for that reason I advise you to stow yourselves away in the stable and sheds, or in your tents—or in both—and get a good night's rest. Meanwhile, you not only have my best thanks for your prompt compliance with all my wishes, but Mr. Clark and I will consult during the night as to the best way of entering upon our gold-seeking to-morrow."

These remarks were received with a general buzz of satisfaction, and one of the sergeants was about to propose three cheers for Captain Dawson, when the latter resumed:

"No, we'll not have the cheers just now, if you please, for the reason that there may be within hearing a few more men of much the same stamp as the Pioneer Brothers who have just left us. The business now in hand is to get to rest for the night, with a view to be ready for the exigencies of the coming day."

A general scattering followed these observations, and in another minute only the captain remained visible within the radius of the fires the Pioneer Brothers had lighted.

What a pleased, tender light was that which came into his eyes and glowed upon his fine features, as he surveyed his surroundings, and turned his gaze toward the entrance of the cottage.

"Ah, if I had been less prompt or less ready!" he said to himself. "The danger was even more pressing than I imagined. But what joy to have been here in time, and especially what delight to have been so welcome!"

With a tender glow upon his features, he turned away abruptly and retraced his steps to the cottage.

As he reached the door, it was drawn open from within, and he found himself face to face with Nettie, whose radiant eyes and glowing features told the story of her own and her father's gratitude for the services the young captain had rendered them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEPUTY'S LITTLE GAME.

The fires had burned low, and the silence of midnight had taken complete possession of the scene, when a stealthy intruder could have been seen entering the hermit's premises from the high, wooded hills to the westward, following the brook of which we have repeatedly spoken.

This intruder was Natt Garry.

He had evidently had a fall from his horse, for there was a bruise upon his forehead, which had bled freely, and he had also had a weary struggle through briars and prickly bushes, as was indicated only too clearly by many a rent and tear in his garments.

Reaching a commanding point of the garden, the deputy came to a halt and bent a keen glance upon all the principal features around him.

Gradually his eyes kindled jubilantly, and his scarred and scheming face became a picture of jubilation.

"Yes, this must be the old hermit's place," he murmured. "No one else would

have had the means or the time to make all these improvements."

Hastening to the nearest fire, he seized a brand and waved it around his head, as if in accordance with some previous understanding, and then took his way toward the spot where he had made his appearance.

He was soon met by Jake Sherwood and all of his followers, who came down the banks of the torrent.

"Here we are, sure enough," was the remark with which he greeted the newcomers. "Such a time as we have had in reaching this spot. I was never so tired, scratched, battered and disgusted. But it seems that luck is with us for once, and that we have not been toiling in vain."

"Have you seen the hermit?" asked Jake Sherwood, as he leaned wearily upon his rifle.

"No," replied Garry, "and for the excellent reason that he would naturally be abed and asleep at such a late hour. But we have only to surround the house and thump him up, and he will drop into our hands like a coon ripe for the oven."

"I know a trick worth two of that," suggested Jake Sherwood.

"What is it, Jake?" queried the deputy.

The reply was given in a few whispered sentences.

"Excellent," was the deputy's comment. "Conceal yourselves at the side of this summer-house, or whatever it is," and he indicated the pavilion, "and I will see what can be done upon the basis suggested."

Jake and the rest of the posse hastened to conceal themselves in the position suggested, while the deputy stole noiselessly toward the veranda, pausing every few steps a moment to listen.

In due course, being satisfied with all he saw, he gained the door, and knocked loudly upon it.

"Who's there?" came from within. The deputy started, with a chuckle of the keenest delight.

The voice reaching his hearing was the voice of the hermit.

"A friend," he responded.

"What do you want?"

"I want a bite to eat and shelter for the night."

"Who are you?"

"I am Colonel Stevenson, the contractor."

"But how came you here?"

"I have lost my way and ridden directly away from the fort, instead of riding toward it, and have had a serious fall from my horse."

"Are you alone?"

"Quite so—quite."

A stir came from within.

"You will excuse me for all these questions, Mr. Stevenson," then came from the interior, as heavy bolts were withdrawn. "A lone and unprotected hermit cannot be too careful."

Then came the grinding of a key in a lock, and the door was opened.

"Come in," invited the hermit.

The deputy complied, with a suppressed chuckle of triumph.

"If you will excuse me for a moment, I will light a candle," added the hermit, as he closed the door and locked it.

"Here is a seat, sir," and he placed a chair within reach of the intruder. "Please sit down, sir."

The deputy accepted the invitation, and the hermit crossed the floor to a shelf, where he struck a match, proceeding to apply the flame to the wick of a candle, which was soon sending a somewhat uncertain light throughout the apartment.

"What shall I get you to eat, sir?" demanded the hermit, as he placed the candle on the table near which the deputy was seated. "Some cold meat, bread and butter, a piece of pie—"

"Never mind all those things," interrupted the deputy, whose face was still invisible to the hermit for the double reason that it was turned away from the light and that he had turned up the collar of his coat.

"Never mind them?" repeated the hermit. "But you spoke of something to eat."

"I have changed my mind."

"Ah, why so?"

"What I said on that point was merely an excuse."

"An excuse?"

"Like all the rest of my remarks," avowed the deputy. "I made all those declarations merely to secure admittance."

"Ah! you have deceived me?"

"From the first word to the last."

"You are not Colonel Stevenson, the well-known army contractor?"

"Nor even a blood relation!"

"And you haven't lost your way?"

"No more than you have."

"You don't need food or shelter?"

"Not in the least."

"Then who are you?"

The deputy turned his glowing, jubilant visage into the light, at the same time turning down the collar of his coat.

"What! Natt Garry!"

"At your service."

"What are you here for?"

"To share with you in the gold you have recently discovered, and in the products thereof," avowed the deputy, as he produced a revolver, "or to snake you off to prison on a number of good and sufficient charges to keep you there for a long time to come!"

The hermit sunk into the nearest chair with the air of being annihilated.

"Choose, therefore, and choose quickly, Mr. Clark," added the deputy, with a face livid with triumph. "Either give me a share of your gold and tell me where you found it, or I shall instantly take you into custody by virtue of all these warrants!"

And he drew out a formidable package of documents, tossing them upon the table.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SHEARER SHORN.

Very greatly to the deputy's astonishment, the hermit smiled in his face, without exhibiting the least trace of apprehension.

"Does it not strike you as a singular circumstance, Mr. Garry," he returned, "that you should find me fully dressed, and that I should be waiting for you at the door?"

The deputy stirred uneasily.

"I had not thought of that," he avowed after a few moments of reflection, "but it is a little odd that you should be alert at such a late hour."

"Let me say here that you will think less of your victory when the battle is ended," continued the hermit. "Instead of deceiving me, you've been taken in. For instance, I saw you the very moment you came in sight at the side of the brook."

"You did?"

"And also at the moment when you waved the fire-brand around your head, thus revealing your features as plainly as I see them at this moment."

The deputy looked troubled. "I was also watching you at the moment when you were joined by Jake Sherwood and your six other companions."

Natt Garry muttered a curse.

"And then I saw Jake and his friends conceal themselves behind the willow," continued the gold-finder, "and when you came to the house. You may think that if there has been any deception in this matter, you are the deceiver, and not the deceived."

"It looks like it, I must say," declared the intruder, changing all sorts of excuses and excuses, and finally coming to a halt.

"As to your threats, Mr. Clark," pursued the hermit, with a smile that made the intruder as very disagreeable, "you will permit me to respond to them in my own way."

Raising his voice, he called:

"Nettie!"

His daughter responded to the summons, appearing from the adjoining room

with a quiet grace and self-possession that well became her marvelous beauty.

"Heavens! who is she?" blurted the deputy.

"The young lady is my only daughter, Mr. Garry," replied the hermit, "and it is hardly necessary to say that you would not have gained admittance here if she or I had the least reason to fear you. Mr. Girder!"

At this second call, the orderly of Captain Dawson's company made his appearance, giving the deputy a highly sarcastic nod of recognition.

"Mr. Chester!"

At this third call the second sergeant of the company appeared at the heels of his superior, bestowing upon the intruder the same sort of withering recognition which had been exhibited by his predecessor.

"Captain Dawson!"

The call had scarcely been uttered, when the young captain appeared in the doorway behind his subordinates.

"Well, well, this is a surprise, gentlemen," cried the deputy, as he sprung to his feet, turning as white as a sheet. "Glad to see you again, Captain Dawson!"

He offered his hand, but the young officer withdrew from all contact with it as promptly as if it had been a deadly serpent.

"I cannot touch the hand of any such miscreant as you are, Natt Garry," said Alfred, with the coldest scorn it is possible for any human being to exhibit. "Neither can my sergeants. You seem to forget that we have all been within hearing ever since your intrusion, and that we could not well avoid hearing the lies and threats you have uttered!"

"I—I was only joking, gentlemen," stammered Garry, sinking back into his chair. "Merely joking!"

"Joking, with that revolver in your hand and these warrants in your pocket!" cried Captain Dawson, sternly, as he caught up the package of papers the intruder had flung on the table. "Look out, sir, and not expect us to believe such falsehoods, or I shall think you are nearly as much fool as knave!"

At this stern rebuke the blood came surging back into the deputy's features.

"All right," he said. "If you want war with me you can have it. I still have my commission as deputy-sheriff, and here are no less than twelve authentic warrants for the arrest of Mr. Clark. You will please take notice, therefore, that I am still master of the situation!"

"You think so?" returned Captain Dawson, with a crushing sneer. "Fortunately I am in a position to soon teach you the contrary. To begin with, here is your revocation as deputy-sheriff," and he laid before Garry a document that caused him to shrink, as if it had been a live coal. "It is not a thing of to-day nor of yesterday, you will see, sir, but it was issued and dated five months ago, and you will see from it that you are now empowered to arrest any person whatever!"

How terribly the ex-deputy winced at this declaration can be imagined.

"As to these warrants," resumed Captain Dawson, in a low, stern voice, "they are not worth the paper upon which they are written. The lies and pretenses upon which you obtained them have been refuted in every instance, and in every instance I have obtained an order for their recall, with due orders to seize and confiscate them wherever found. Here is my authority to this end," and he thrust a bundle of papers under Garry's nose. "And you certainly know enough of me to comprehend that I, and not you, am the master of the situation!"

Natt Garry took one good look, gasping for breath.

"You are right, captain," he declared, "and I know my business too well to fly in the face of such evidence."

He arose and buttoned up his coat, adding:

"I acknowledge myself vanquished, and will take my leave."

"You will? Not just yet, if you please!" returned Captain Dawson, with glances like forked lightning. "I have here several warrants for your arrest, and now is a good time to serve them!"

"Warrants! For my arrest?" gasped Garry, as his face became whiter than ever.

"It's even so," affirmed Captain Dawson, producing the documents in question, which he shuffled under Garry's gaze. "Here's one for highway robbery, and another for assault with intent to kill. You can look them over at your leisure after you are locked up!"

"Locked up!" shrieked Garry.

"Which will be your situation as soon as a squad of my men can convey you to the lock-up! So up with your hands!"

The mandate was enforced by revolvers in the hands of the two sergeants, and in another minute Natt Garry was a bound and writhing prisoner.

CHAPTER XXX.

PLANS FOR THE MORROW.

The rejoicings which succeeded all these important captures require no description.

Nettie Clark was especially gratified, not only for her father's sake but for her own, and already looked upon Captain Dawson with an admiration and affection for which she could not easily have found expression.

"The next thing to do, Mr. Clark," observed the young officer, when Natt Garry had been removed to the presence of Captain Harvester and Lieutenant Moonlight, "is to send away those waiting associates of this ex-deputy. I will attend to the matter."

He went out to the pavilion, smiling to see into what small space the intruders packed themselves at his approach in the hope of avoiding detection.

"I have business with you, Mr. Sherwood," called Captain Dawson, when they were no longer able to conceal themselves, and Jake had taken the desperate part of arising and coming forward, "and hence you need not make any further efforts to escape my notice."

"Business?" repeated Jake, nervously, as he recognized the new-comer.

"Yes. Do you know me?"

Jake Sherwood assented, with a marked increase of uneasiness.

"In that case," pursued Captain Dawson, "you will hardly be surprised to hear that I have arrested Natt Garry upon several warrants which charge him with very serious crimes, and that he will not be able to be of any further use to you in your scheme for plundering Mr. Clark of the gold he has found, and for forcing him to tell you his secrets!"

Jake and his friends looked as if a very considerable earthquake had suddenly manifested itself under them, but they did not feel like relinquishing their great hopes without a protest.

They even looked around in a menacing sort of way, as if asking themselves how much force the young officer could bring to bear upon them.

He understood them perfectly.

"If you will come with me a moment," he added, "I will give you the best of reasons for paying very particular heed to all I tell you."

Within five minutes he had escorted them over the premises, giving them a view of the crowded stable and the still more crowded tents, which had been quickly pitched in the edge of the adjacent woods, during the very time consumed by the first interview of the young officer with the hermit and Nettie.

"You will now realize that I have more than a hundred men within call," then observed Captain Dawson, "and that at the least sign of impudence from you, very prompt action will be taken against you."

Jake Sherwood assented, with a nervousness which attested that his record was of a very disquieting nature.

"You will accordingly take your way

back to the fort without losing a moment," pursued Captain Dawson, "and bear in mind henceforth that my eyes are upon you, and that you are upon your good behavior. Where are your horses?"

Jake indicated the spot where they had been left.

"Very well. Take your way back to them," enjoined the young officer, "and retrace your steps through the ravine, and be thankful that I am willing to accept Natt Garry as a scapegoat for all of you!"

He waved them off with an air that showed that he had nothing more to say to them, and they hurried away with a promptness which attested how glad they were to escape the fate which had overtaken their late leader.

Returning to the cottage, he sent the prisoners away under charge of Mr. Chester and half a dozen men, and at the same time dismissed Mr. Girder to his tent, with a hint to get all the rest he could during the balance of the night.

The young officer was thus left alone with the hermit and his daughter, whose eyes turned upon him as if he had been their guardian angel.

"There! it looks now as if we could have a moment to ourselves," he exclaimed, looking from one to the other with a smile as he took possession of the lounge which occupied one side of the sitting-room. "How do you like the situation of affairs as far as we have gone?"

"Nettie can speak for herself," replied the hermit, with deep feeling, "but I realize that you have saved us from a fate worse than death. If you are not too tired, captain, I should like to tell you what took place here before your arrival, and also narrate all that has happened to me since I discovered my first gold."

"I shall be very glad to have these details, and especially an account of the proceedings of that rascally Campus," replied Captain Dawson, "for I feel that they may have an important bearing upon our future."

We need not pause upon these communications.

It is enough to say that in the course of another hour the young officer was in possession of all the facts known to the reader.

"Campus and the Brooker boys are a bad lot to deal with," was his first comment upon the narration, "but I do not believe they will be able to get out of this neighborhood with all that gold before we can get track of them. Some of the men in my company have acquired no mean reputation as scouts, and I will have two or three of them on the track of these thieves with the first gleams of day."

"And now to compare notes, captain, concerning our discoveries of gold," proposed the hermit, as he produced a large manuscript map from the drawer of the table near him, and proceeded to unfold it. "I will show you where I have had the best luck, and you will be able to see at a glance whether we have visited the same fields or not."

The interest with which Nettie followed this investigation was as great as that of her father and lover.

"It seems that there have been no real points of contact between us," at length said the captain, "but we both agree that there is probably a rich deposit at the foot of Pilot Mountain. Let us say as much to the boys in the morning and proceed to take possession."

The two separated upon this understanding, the captain returning to his tent, which was scarcely a hundred yards away, with the assurance that the cottage would be guarded during the balance of the night, and that he would see the hermit and Nettie early in the morning.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CAMP OF PILOT MOUNTAIN.

It was two weeks later.

At the foot of Pilot Mountain had arisen a mining-town, as also an extensive group of mining claims, which had already become a marvel.

At least a hundred tents, and almost as many huts and cabins of various shapes and descriptions, attested with what vigor the story of the hermit's finds had circulated throughout the Territory.

The nucleus of New Ophir—for such was the pretentious name which had been adopted for the new town—was of course the company of discharged soldiers, of which Captain Dawson had so long been the commander.

Every man of them had staked out a claim, and the hermit and Captain Dawson had followed their example.

A freight and Express line had been organized not merely to Fort Washakie, but as far as the nearest point of the railway.

The trails in every direction were alive with prairie schooners and men on horse-back, to say nothing of the crowds who were not possessed of means to indulge in either of these modes of travel.

Not merely old miners and prospectors, but also farmers, stock-raisers, railroad men, clerks and cowboys had been attracted by the reports, more or less exaggerated, which had been made of the discoveries of the "Golden Hermit," as Mr. Clark had generally been designated by popular rumor.

But this was not all.

As is always the case in like circumstances, the rogues and robbers of every sort and name had come from every point of the compass, like vultures to a feast.

The Pioneer Brothers were there almost to a man, as were Jake Sherwood and his chums.

Nor was this the only complication.

The camp and town, although on Government land, were close to the Shoshone Reservation, and hence the redskins had been nearly as much excited as their white brothers over the hermit's discoveries.

In fact, Brown Bear and a large proportion of his people had lost no time in putting in an appearance at the scene of excitement, and had established themselves in a rival town and camp just within the limits of their lands, and as near to their rivals as the line of demarkation permitted.

With these redskins had come Campus and the Brooker boys, as also the sister of the latter, who had established themselves in one of the handsomest model tents which had ever been seen in the Territory.

Just across the line in front of Campus and his associates was a still larger tent, although a less handsome one, which was occupied by Hank Lippman, the sutler, who had moved up his stock of goods from Fort Washakie, and who had for his clerks Rudd Wimble and Jeb Pinckney, the ex-cavalryman.

The trio had laid off the disguises with which they had started in pursuit of the hermit, and were among the most prosperous citizens of New Ophir, since their business was to rake into the sutler's coffers a large share of the gold found by others.

The hermit and Captain Dawson had joined in building a neat cottage on the line of their claims, and had removed to it a large share of the furniture and household goods which had accumulated during long years at the hermit's retreat.

The housekeeper of the mutual dwelling was of course the hermit's charming daughter.

The hermit had been chosen by acclamation to be the captain of the camp, in accordance with law, while Captain Dawson had been placed at the head of the

military force, and was also the chief of the Vigilantes.

As to the finds of gold which had been made since the founding of the camp, we must confess that there are very notable gaps in the statistics which have reached us concerning them.

It is believed that some very important deposits of nuggets were unearthed on four or five different claims, but that these finds were kept secret from motives of prudence which will be readily comprehended.

Be that as it may, the reports of discoveries which circulated during these two weeks were barely important enough to keep alive the excitement, and stimulate further inquiries and researches.

During the time which had elapsed since Nettie made the acquaintance of the young captain, she had learned to think all the world of him, and had become formally betrothed to him, with the approval of her father.

Not a word had come to them during this interval of the whereabouts of the gold which had been stolen by Campus and his intimates, the Brooker boys, yet this fact did not seriously interfere with the happiness of the lovers, or even with the peace of mind of the hermit.

The two men had made a very satisfactory increase to their wealth, and had said nothing to any outsider about it.

It is scarcely necessary to add, after the perils Nettie had encountered, that she was the constant companion of her father and lover, and was seldom out of their sight.

The evening of the fourteenth day of their stay at New Ophir saw the trio seated at the door of their cabin, Nettie in a camp-chair, and her father and Captain Dawson on a rustic bench they had placed under the large pine which shaded their abode.

"Well, captain, we do not seem to have done a very heavy business to-day," remarked the hermit, after a thoughtful pause. "Are you getting discouraged?"

"No, not exactly discouraged," replied the young officer, "but I have reached a number of conclusions, and one of them is that we have seen our best days in this neighborhood as gold-seekers!"

"I think so, too," acknowledged the hermit. "The present indications seem to be that the deposits of gold hereabouts are wholly superficial. But you spoke of several conclusions. I should like to hear the others."

"Another is that we will do well to give more attention to the recovery of the treasure stolen by Campus and his party. I think it will be much easier to recover that fortune than to find another like it."

"I agree with you, captain."

"And finally, whether we find that fortune or not," concluded the young officer, "I think we are already possessed of sufficient means to establish ourselves comfortably in some growing city of the West, and make an end forever of all the risks and privations of our present situation."

"That, too, is a point well taken," declared the hermit. "I must say, now that we have touched upon the subject of our dangers and annoyances, that I am not pleased to live so near to Campus and the Brookers, or even with such neighbors as Jake Sherwood. The sooner we are out of this the better."

Nettie and Captain Dawson were both of this opinion, and for substantially the same reasons.

The maiden was not only anxious for the safety of her betrothed, but also for that of her father, while both the hermit and the captain had only too many reasons to fear that Campus and others were likely to enter into some conspiracy against them.

"It certainly seems odd," resumed the hermit, after his thoughts had drifted a few moments in this channel, "that

Campus and the Brooker boys should be blossoming out in such an expensive way since their arrival on the other side of the line. I hear that they are not making any efforts to find gold, but that they spend all their time in drinking and horse-racing, playing their Indian games and holding high carnival generally."

"And of course all this is done at your expense, papa," suggested Nettie. "You said you had an understanding with the Express to bear if these thieves should make any attempt to ship the gold stolen from us. Have you had any news on this point?"

"Not yet, and I may add that I hardly expect any," replied the hermit. "The rascals are clever enough to go easy for the present, knowing that we are likely to keep an eye upon them. Another thing, they have excellent horses, and it's no great affair to put fifty pounds of gold into a sack and go to the fort or elsewhere to get the cash for it. You must remember, too, that Hank Lippman is now buying over his counter all the gold that is offered to him, and he would as soon buy from an Indian as from a white man. In fact, he is constantly buying all that is offered him from either side of the line, and he would as soon buy our stolen gold as any other, inasmuch as there is not the least chance of identifying it."

"And here's another very curious thing which I had forgotten to mention," remarked Captain Dawson. "Since he arrived here from his village the other day, the principal chief of the Shoshones, Brown Bear, seems to have become utterly demoralized. Not only has he ceased to exercise any control over his people, but he lies drunk from morning to night, and at the same time seems to be handling a great deal of gold and money."

"Is Father Camp still with him?" asked Nettie.

"He is," replied the captain, "although I hear he has threatened to abandon the Reservation altogether if Brown Bear does not turn over a new leaf within the next few days. Mr. Camp says this gold excitement threatens to prove a worse scourge to the redskins than the epidemic by which they were terribly decimated last winter. Most of the squaws present spend a good deal of their time looking for gold, but the bucks, almost to a man, are drinking and gambling, and getting ready for all sorts of mischief and violence. There have already been a number of serious quarrels between the Shoshones and our people, and Father Camp and I have had all we could do to prevent a pitched battle."

The hermit sighed with an air of pain and uneasiness.

"Of course we must not shut our eyes to such a state of affairs as this," he declared. "When the novelty of this gold excitement has worn off and everybody is brought face to face with the sober realities of the situation, there will be serious trouble hereabouts, and the best we can do, captain, is to take Nettie to a place of safety. All the gold in the world would not pay us for allowing her to fall into the hands of Campus again!"

"We'll pull out to-morrow, going back to your old home, as our first step, after quietly handing over our official places to our successors," decided the young officer, with the promptness habitual to him. "In the mean time, however, I have determined to disguise myself as a Shoshone, and pay a visit to our neighbors!"

The mere suggestion of such a design was enough to banish every trace of color from Nettie's face.

"The truth is," added Captain Dawson, "I wish to see what Campus is about, and it is quite possible that I may make some discovery in regard to the stolen gold."

The hermit joined with Nettie in an

effort to dissuade him from this dangerous undertaking, but he persisted, saying that he would take good care of himself and not be gone too long, and then he assumed a disguise he had been accumulating for several days preceding and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

Thanks to his long residence in the vicinity, Captain Dawson had assumed a disguise that would have passed anywhere unquestioned.

Then, too, he had given such careful attention to the language of the redskins that he was able to pronounce all the words commonly in use in such a way that no suspicion could have possibly been aroused by them.

Add to these qualifications the fact that he had taken care to make himself familiar with all the features of the adjacent camp and the surrounding country, and it will be seen that his enterprise was not so desperate as Nettle and her father were inclined to consider it.

To crown all the chances in the young officer's favor, the night was dark and cloudy, with a wind sufficiently high and squally to cover any reasonable sounds which might be caused by an intruder's movements.

The only arms carried by the captain were a pair of revolvers, but he had taken care to place them in such a position that he could draw them simultaneously, in case he should have any sudden occasion for their use.

With a forethought worthy of the character he was assuming, he "fetched a compass" of a mile to the northward before entering the Reservation, thus crossing the line at a point where it was wholly unguarded, and also at one where there was not likely to be any witness of his movements.

These points secured, he took his way into the Indian village, proceeding directly to the tent of Brown Bear.

The old chief was reclining on a pile of skins between his tent and a fire which had been kindled in the open space in front of it.

He was a rather fine specimen of the native chief, being large of frame and athletic, with fine eyes, and countenance which did not possess in a too marked degree, the high cheekbones and other characteristics of his people.

But he was none the less fretful, discontented and even rebellious, he having, like nine-tenths of the chiefs on our frontier, found an immense difference between what he had been led to expect of the Government, and what the Government actually gave him.

Between the chief and the fire reclined a young Shoshone who was instantly recognized by Captain Dawson as Horatio Campus.

By virtue of his education and travels, in addition to his natural rank, character, and capacity, Campus had become a sort of mentor and adviser to the old chief, and was already regarded by many of the redskins as the chief's probable successor.

"You have sent for me, great chief, and I am here," Campus was saying, at the moment of the young officer's appearance on the scene. "The young chief awaits the Brown Bear's pleasure!"

It was about the fourth time Campus had made this announcement, but his patience was not at all exhausted, as a glance had sufficed to tell him that Brown Bear was full of whisky, and that the bottle he still grasped was quite empty.

Given such a state of affairs, and the absence of any further supplies, the chief could always be depended upon to reach a state of semi-consciousness within a brief delay, and such proved to be the case now.

"The great chief is glad to see his favorite son," answered Brown Bear, as he drew himself up into a sitting posture. "Have you brought me the gold?"

"Here it is, great chief."

Campus arose and handed Brown Bear a small sack, which must have contained fifteen or twenty pounds of nuggets.

"And the fire-water?"

"A dozen bottles have been placed in Brown Bear's tent."

The old chief uttered a grunt of contentment.

"That's all," he muttered. "The Brown Bear loves his favorite son."

Campus turned to go, but at this moment a new personage appeared on the scene—Father Camp—who had been observing the interview from the shadow of the chief's tent.

The missionary was a thin-faced, sad-eyed man, who seemed to have passed days in toil and gloom, and to have had very little acquaintance with the bright side of existence.

"One moment, Horatio," said the missionary to Campus, who, it will be remembered, had received his name from the good clergyman, and had been regarded as an adopted son and treated as such. "Have you heard anything yet about the whereabouts of my daughter?"

"No, father, I'm sorry to say," replied Campus, as a strange flush mantled his face.

"Have you searched for her to-day, as usual?" pursued the clergyman.

"I have, father."

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked Brown Bear.

"Of my adopted daughter, Isabella Camp, who has been missing more than two weeks," explained the missionary.

"Isabella!" repeated the disguised Captain Dawson, mentally, with a start of the keenest interest.

It will be remembered that this was the name of the young officer's lost sister, whose story he had told to the hermit and Nettle.

"What about her?" pursued Brown Bear.

The missionary sighed wearily.

He had told the story of the missing girl repeatedly, but the old chief could not remember it from one day to another, and the reverend gentleman knew that he would now insist on hearing it again.

"Why, after she came here three months ago from Wyoming City, following the death of my wife," explained Father Camp, "Horatio fell in love with her, and wished to marry her, but she wouldn't have him."

"Quite right," grunted the old chief. "White girl should marry white man!"

"That was what I said to Horatio," pursued the missionary, "and this view was all the more obligatory for the reason that he was already engaged to Emily Brooker. I accordingly sent Isabella to a friend near Lander, with instructions to stay there until after the marriage of Emily and Horatio—"

"Ah! I remember!" interrupted the old chief. "Instead of marrying, they got into a terrible fight, nearly killing one another, and Horatio fled, and the Brooker boys pursued him. Let's see, what took place next?"

"Why, they healed up their differences and came back to us, and so I brought my daughter back, that she might help me with the classes."

"Yes, I remember."

"But the day after her return she disappeared suddenly," continued the missionary, "and from that hour to this I am in utter ignorance of her whereabouts and fate."

The old chief looked pained and puzzled.

As to Campus, he averted his face uneasily, and there was a strange gleam of intelligence in his black eyes.

"Would she have run away without telling you?" asked Brown Bear, after a pause.

"Never," replied Father Camp. "She had no place to go to, and she wouldn't have gone away for even an hour without speaking to me about it. To be sure," he added, "this has long been no place for her, and she has long been restless and dissatisfied, but she was candor itself, and would not have gone away without my knowledge and approval."

"Then how do you explain her absence?" queried the Brown Bear, showing as much interest in the case as if he had never before heard of it.

"I cannot explain it," declared the missionary, with the deepest gloom and dejection. "I can only suppose that some villain, red or white, is depriving her of her liberty, or has even murdered her in some outburst of passion."

As he made this declaration the glances of the missionary settled with strange intensity upon the features of Campus, and even with a well-defined, although hesitating, suspicion.

"And you know nothing about it, Campus?" asked the Brown Bear, as he turned his eyes upon the sinister hypocrite.

"Nothing whatever, great chief," and with this he inclined himself in turn to the Brown Bear and his foster-father and walked rapidly away.

It is needless to say that Captain Dawson followed him with due secrecy and caution.

After all that he had heard and seen he felt that the missing girl was in the power of Campus, and that it was his duty to make an attempt at her rescue, independent of the keen conviction which had entered his heart that she might prove to be his sister.

At the distance of a dozen rods from the chief's tent—just far enough to be concealed in the dense shadows of the night—Campus encountered a horse and a top buggy which he had evidently placed in waiting there previous to his visit to Brown Bear.

Untying the horse, the redskin sprung into the buggy and drove away rapidly, with the air of a man who has so often traversed the route that the darkness gives him no especial trouble.

It instantly struck Captain Dawson, of course, as one of the strangest of circumstances, that the redskins should be using such a vehicle, but the fact was in itself enough to suggest that some extraordinary project was involved in it.

There was just room enough at the rear of the buggy for Captain Dawson, and he was prompt to avail himself of the chance thus afforded him of bearing the redskin company without his knowledge.

"And now to know what he knows," was the thought with which he settled himself into his perch for the journey.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CAMPUS AND HIS PRISONER.

After a drive of an hour Campus came to a halt under a large pine, to which he very carefully attached his horse.

Then he produced from under the seat of the buggy a lantern, which he proceeded to light, with many a curse and ejaculation of impatience, the wind obliging him to light several matches before his purpose was accomplished.

By the light thus thrown upon the features of the redskin, the watcher saw that they were very stern and determined.

By this light, too, Captain Dawson was enabled to follow him.

At the distance of one hundred yards from the tree, the redskin found himself under the shadow of a tall butte, which was the most striking feature of the landscape for many miles around.

Here dwelt, in a snug hut which had been built for her by her relatives and people, an old Indian woman who was supposed to be nearly a hundred years old.

She was the squaw of a former chief, and had survived all her kindred.

Her reputation was a singular compound of witch, prophetess, and doctress.

The great majority of her own people stood in mortal fear of her, and could not have been induced to pay her a visit under any circumstances.

She was singularly strong and lively for one of her years, and was a marvel of energy and resolution, so that she was not even accessible to a sentiment of fear, as would have been the case with almost any one else dwelling in such a solitude.

She not only cultivated a garden near her hut, but she had her traps and pitfalls in the adjacent hills, and was in a measure independent of the contributions she received from her people.

As Campus reached the hut of this strange hermitess, he found it wrapped in darkness.

"It's me, Eidola," he called, as he tapped gently upon the door.

A mumbled reply came from within, followed by sounds of a movement, and the door was soon opened.

"Come in, Campus," was the greeting of the old crone. "You have brought the snuff?"

"Yes, mother."

He handed out a small package, which the old woman seized eagerly.

"Come in," she repeated. "I will light a candle."

"It's unnecessary," returned Campus. "I shall not be here long, and my lantern will answer every purpose. How is the girl?"

"As stubborn and disagreeable as ever," was the answer, in a chattering sort of tone that would hardly have been intelligible to any one unused to it. "She makes me a great deal of trouble. I have to watch her every minute, or she would make her escape, or at least make the attempt. I have not opened her door since noon, through fear that she would spring upon me."

"I have come to take her away," said Campus, quietly. "Are you inclined to do me a very particular favor, Eidola?"

"Anything you can name. The young chief knows that I am entirely devoted to him."

Such was indeed the case.

Campus had been politic enough to show her many a favor and kindness.

"What is it?" she added.

"I want you to go and watch my horse till I come back to it," said Campus, as he placed his lantern on the table.

"Certainly. Is it under the pine?"

"It is, mother, and I think there is a wild horse or two hanging about which may stampede it. Be prompt, please, and remain there until I return to you."

Nodding assent, the old crone seized a stout staff, and hurried in the direction of the pine, passing within a few yards of a clump of bushes behind which Captain Dawson had taken refuge.

Halting on the steps of the hut, Campus watched the old hermitess until she was near the pine, and then hastily entered, closing the door behind him.

Then he crossed the floor to the narrow and dingy apartment, and turned the key of an inner door, pushing it open.

"Come out," he called.

In response to this summons, there was a stir within the inner room, and a young lady of marvelous beauty came out to the redskin.

"Ah, there you are," was his greeting, in a tone of the coarsest brutality. "I have come for your answer!"

"My answer, Horatio Campus," replied the girl, in a voice of rare sweetness, "is the same now that it always has been."

"You will not marry me?"

"Never!"

"Then so much the worse for you," and the voice of Campus was husky and deeply concentrated, while his eyes glowed like those of a ravening wolf. "Let me make a last appeal to you!"

"It's unnecessary," returned the captive, as coldly as scornfully. "All that you can say will never have the least effect upon me!"

"Don't be too sure of that, Isabella," enjoined Campus, grimly. "When you hear that your life is at stake, you may conclude to be more reasonable."

"I mean that I have come here for the last time," avowed Campus, as he seized a chair and sat down between the captive and the door, while his eyes literally glared at her. "I have brought a horse and buggy, in the hope that you will conclude to ride away with me to freedom and happiness. Promise to marry me, and I will dig up that gold I stole from the Clarks, and we will go away to one of our great cities and enjoy it."

"Never! never!"

"Think twice, Isabella, for the matter is more serious for you than you have hitherto supposed. The old chief and Father Camp are inquiring for you, and to let you go back to them, after what I have done, would be equivalent to committing suicide!"

"But why talk to me of marriage? Are you not engaged to Emily Brooker?"

"True, and she begins to wonder why I do not come to time. This thing cannot go on as it is going. In a few days more or less those watchful and suspicious brothers will call me to account. I have decided to make an end of all this worry and uncertainty to-night. If you still say you will not marry me, I'll strangle you now and here, with these two hands, and sink you in the lake!"

"You would not dare to! Eidola would not let you!" cried the captive, very pale, but as resolute as ever.

"Eidola! She is wholly devoted to me. She'd strangle you herself, if I were to ask her to render me this service. Besides, she is not here. I have sent her out to the pine, under pretense of guarding my horse. Don't be foolish, Isabella! Don't deceive yourself in regard to my desperation!"

"But Emily—"

"Don't mention her name to me!" interrupted Campus, with a fury that increased with every word he uttered. "I hate the very sight of her! Despite all the advantages she has had, she is nothing but a squaw! In comparison with you, she's as coarse as dog's-hair—a painted pudding—a living millstone! If I ever marry her, it will be after you are dead and gone beyond all redemption. She's nothing but an 'Injun.'"

"Neither are you, Campus," declared the captive, sternly, "since you have treated me in such a way that I can no longer conceal my real sentiments. You are as much a savage as you were the very first day Father Camp set eyes on you! All you have learned only makes your native deformity all the more hideous! I despise and defy you! If it be that I am really at your mercy, and you are resolved to kill me, I shall regret the fact with my latest breath, but I will not plead to you for mercy! I am ready to die!"

"Die, then!"

He was too much under the sway of his terrible emotions to say more, and in another instant he had her by the throat.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WEIGHTY PROBLEM.

It is hardly necessary to say that Captain Dawson was not far distant at that moment.

The departure of the old Indian woman had given him a chance to gain the door of her hut unseen.

Here he had watched and listened with such intense impatience and excitement that he had not hesitated to place the door slightly ajar at the moment of the captive's appearance from the inner room.

What a start was that he gave at the instant his gaze rested upon her features!

He could hardly suppress the cry of astonishment which rose to his lips.

One of the treasures he prized the most was a portrait of his mother as a young girl, and it now seemed as if this portrait had suddenly become incarnate before him!

In other words, this captive of Eidola's retreat was the very image of Mrs. Dawson at the same age!

And how such a fact as this was calculated to send the blood coursing through the veins of the young officer will be readily comprehended by the reader who recalls what has been said about the captain's lost sister.

Then came the name Isabella, as if to complete the revelation involved in the tell-tale resemblance.

From that moment the young officer could not doubt that he had under his gaze the sister which had been stolen by the redskins all those long years before.

As strangely and suddenly as the truth had come to him, he could not reject it.

Whether the fact of the relationship could ever be proved or not, it none the less certainly existed.

And with such a recognition as this thrilling every fiber of his soul, it is easy to see with what impatience Captain Dawson gave his attention to the brutal scene which succeeded between the maiden and Horatio Campus.

As he continued to watch and listen, his conviction of the identity of the captive with his lost sister was singularly confirmed and strengthened.

Her voice, her manner, her gestures—all simply duplicated what he had seen a thousand times displayed by his mother!

It is needless to say, therefore, how ready the young officer was for action when at length the critical moment dawned upon him.

At the instant Campus seized his captive, he received a blow on the head which doubled him up in a heap at her feet, where he lay as if lifeless.

This blow had been given with a stout piece of wood which Dawson had taken from the old woman's pile beside the door at an early stage of the interview.

Not knowing precisely what the effect would be, the captain followed up this first advantage by binding the hands of the redskin behind him.

As to the emotions with which the captive had marked this unexpected interposition in her favor, she could not have possibly defined them.

As she had given herself up for lost, it was like passing from death to life.

Then, too, the fact that she took the newcomer for an Indian, added to the mystery of the proceeding.

There was even a moment when she asked herself if one persecutor was to be replaced by another.

But her deliverer did not long leave her in uncertainty.

"There! you are safe now, Miss Camp," he announced, when he had finished binding the redskin. "You have nothing further to fear from this man or any other."

What gentleness in his tones! What kindly respect!

For an instant the young officer forgot his disguise, and then he flushed under his paints.

"Do not fear me because I seem to belong to his race," he added, hastily. "I am simply disguised. I am really Captain Dawson, of the army."

He announced his identity as the best and quickest way of quieting the maiden's fears, and the result responded fully to his expectations.

"I am familiar with your name, captain," she responded, in a voice that announced the deep joy and gratitude she felt at her rescue. "How shall I ever thank you for this great kindness? You have tracked Campus from the village, I suppose?"

"Or from the new camp—which amounts to the same thing," replied the captain. "You are really Miss Camp, the adopted daughter of the missionary?"

"I am, sir."

"Do you know your history?"

"Only that I was stolen from my home by a band of hostiles when I was about three years old!"

The hearer literally gasped for breath at this first important agreement with the story of his lost sister.

"Has Father Camp any clew to your real name and kindred?"

"Not any, sir."

"No trinket? Nothing that was found upon you when you came into his hands?"

"Only the clothes I wore at that time," replied the rescued girl. "These he saved carefully, and he has them now. His hope has always been that they might some day assist in restoring me to my parents!"

Captain Dawson was quick to see the value of the evidence thus placed at his disposal.

"Miss Camp," he said, solemnly, "I wish you to share with me from this fateful moment the hope by which I am animated. There are many facts within my knowledge which indicate that you and I are brother and sister!"

How she looked at him!

She was unable to speak, and only a gasp for breath and the strange glow of her eyes attested that she had heard him.

"It is even so," he assured, looking down upon her with tender yearning. "You are not only the living image of my mother, but you act like her and speak like her. The age at which you were stolen corresponds to the age at which my sister was lost."

"Oh, if it might be so!" she murmured, with an inexpressible longing for that sympathy and companionship from which she had all her life been debarred.

"It is so!" declared Captain Dawson, as he drew her to his heart. "I will take you to Father Camp and to my mother. Ah! this viper is coming to his senses," and he spurned the figure of the redskin with his foot. "I did not mean to harm him seriously. What can be done with him?"

The young officer reflected, marking the shudder which passed over the maiden's form at a glimpse of the hideous features of her persecutor.

"I will leave him behind us," added the young officer, "but I will also place him beyond the reach of the old woman."

He put a gag in the mouth of his prisoner, strengthening his bonds, and then shouldered him and carried him into the woods for some two hundred yards, where he secured him to a tree.

The villain was beginning to take note of his surroundings by this time, and even offered some resistance, but Captain Dawson did not waste a word on him.

"We will go now, Miss Camp," were the words with which the young officer returned to the rescued girl. "The conveyance with which Campus came here shall be utilized for our departure."

The sigh of relief which came from Miss Camp attested how anxious she was to leave the scene of her sufferings behind her.

"Is there anything here you wish to take away with you?" added the captain.

"Nothing whatever," was her reply. "Campus captured me with only what I stood in, and I have not had a change of garments during the time I have been here. Will you take a look at my prison before you go?"

The captain assented, leading the way to the room in question.

It possessed a single window, but this had been planked over, within and without, and it would have been a hopeless task for any one to hope to escape from the box-like place without assistance.

"Campus spent a whole day here after my capture," explained the rescued girl, as she called the attention of Captain Dawson to the huge nails which had been driven into the interior planking. "As to being rescued, such a hope never entered into my mind, for the simple reason

that no one comes this way from one year to another."

Turning away with a sigh, the captain drew the maiden's arm within his own and left the hut, closing the door behind him.

"I will put out the light and say little," said the captain, extinguishing the lantern, "and perhaps Eldola will not remark that I have taken the redskin's place."

The event responded to this hope, and in another minute the couple were riding away.

"Of course I must leave the horse to himself," observed the captain, "but I dare say he has been here often enough to have a lively knowledge of the route."

Miss Camp was of the same opinion, inasmuch as Campus had been at the hut almost every day during the whole period of her captivity.

"And if he does not go astray," added the young officer, "we will soon solve the great problem whether you are my lost sister or not. My mother is not so far away as to prevent us from having her here in the course of to-morrow!"

"I can only hope, from what you tell me, that the problem will be solved in the affirmative," declared Miss Camp. "Was Isabella the name of your sister?"

"It was, and if you gave that name to Father Camp when you first came to his hands—"

"That's the very thing I did do," interrupted Miss Camp, "and that's the only information I could give about myself."

"Then the affirmative is well-nigh proven," declared the captain. "Ah! if all doubts can be set at rest, and the truth is as I believe it to be! What happiness there is in store for us!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE JAIL-BREAKERS.

On one of the claims which had been taken by the Pioneer Brothers in the New Ophir camp, stood a large tent, which had been purchased by the joint contributions of the brotherhood, and which was regarded as their general headquarters.

Here, after the labors of the day were over, the Brothers were in the habit of congregating, with their pipes and bottles, not to speak of cards and other gambling contrivances, and here they consulted on all points of mutual concern, and discussed their finds and their non-successes, as also the affairs of their neighbors.

Here, too, were kept various stores and supplies, which were held by the Brothers in common.

The ostensible owner and occupant of the claim was that "old Moxley," to whom allusion has been made in a former page, and who was the last man in the world to be guilty of anything resembling labor.

In this tent, at an early hour of the evening, were seated Moxley, Griff, and Walsh—the two latter a couple of the Brothers with whom we have had brief contact—in the act of having a growl at the situation, with the aid of a large black bottle, to which such frequent reference was had that it would seem to have been elected umpire of the occasion.

"Of course you are both entitled to have your own way and say," remarked Griff, breaking a thoughtful silence which had reigned for several minutes, "but I'll frankly declare that my stay in this camp is drawing to a close."

"What's the trouble?" asked Moxley.

"The trouble is that I haven't yet struck a single nugget," explained Griff, "and I've had to work like a stevedore to wash out half or a quarter of an ounce of dust daily."

"Well, my claim is no better than yours," declared Walsh, who was a middle-aged Irishman, and one of the toughest members of the fraternity. "I reached that conclusion before the first

night of my stay upon it, and I've since seen no reason to change my opinion."

Moxley smiled with the air of a man who witnesses the confirmation of his own views and opinions.

"Did I not tell you we should all be sick of gold-seeking before we had been here a fortnight?" he queried, triumphantly. "If there is any one thing in this world that we are not cut out for, that one thing is to bone down to the life of a miner. Don't think for a moment that you alone are singing this sort of tune. All the rest are in the same pickle. I've been hearing nothing but growls of this nature for a week past."

A sound of footsteps caused the trio to look up at this moment, and was followed by the entrance of two additional members of the brotherhood, who proceeded to pay their respects to the black bottle, and then entered upon a general and sweeping expression of their dissatisfaction with their experiences at the New Ophir Camp.

In the course of the next half-hour, the number of the Brothers present was increased to a dozen, but all brought the same sort of gloom and disgust which had been exhibited by their predecessors.

"The truth seems to be," resumed old Moxley, after listening awhile in silence to the complaints of his associates, "that we have not had a fair chance. The cream from this pan of milk was taken off by that old hermit and by Captain Dawson."

"How so?" asked Walsh.

"Why, they have been coming and going hereabouts for years past, and knew just where to look for every ounce of gold," explained Moxley. "Do you mean to tell me that they are contenting themselves with a few paltry ounces? Diamond Jim tells me that Clark must have taken fifty pounds of gold one afternoon out of a certain pool at the end of his claim, and he thinks Captain Dawson's luck has been still better than that. In a word, those two men have taken a handsome fortune out of their claims since we went into camp, and it's all because they knew just where to locate."

"Well, what's to be done?" demanded Griff, with an air of disgust. "Are we going back to Owl Creek, or are we to remain here and starve to death, or kill ourselves with working to no advantage?"

"We're not going to do either of those things, boys," replied Moxley, with a grim smile and a look of sinister meaning. "We're going to look for gold, to be sure, but we're going to look for it in the pockets of those who have it. I'll say no more now, but leave the field to Jake Sherwood, and here he comes."

The entrance of Natt Garry's right-hand man was enough to produce a decided sensation, and all the more readily because he was unusually excited and flushed, and displayed a mien which seemed to foreshadow some mysterious meaning.

"Glad to see you again, gentlemen," was Jake's greeting, "and I bring you news that will come very near lifting you out of your boots. See there!"

He indicated a muffled figure which was in the act of stealing into the tent, and added:

"No noise, if you please, gentlemen, but I know that you'll all be very glad to see your captain!"

"The captain?" echoed half a dozen voices, as the majority of the Brothers leaped excitedly to their feet.

"Yes, here he is, as good as new," announced Jake, as the muffled figure reached his side, "only let us have no more noise about it!"

The new-comer lowered his gloved hand and turned down the collar of his coat, carrying his forefinger to his lips and looking around upon the Brothers with a grim and jubilant smile.

He was indeed Captain Harvester!

Breathless, staring at him as if he had

returned from the dead, the Brothers crowded around him.

"And not alone, boys!" he muttered, with a nod toward a second muffled figure which was advancing from the entrance.

"No, boys, for here I am," avowed this new-comer, in well-remembered tones, "and long life to you!"

He revealed his smiling and sneering features, while a buzz of joyous welcome burst from the lips of the Brothers.

He was Lieutenant Moonlight.

"Nor is this all our good luck, boys," said Captain Harvester, as he called attention to a third closely-enveloped figure which had entered the tent, "for here comes a new accession to our band in the person of the well-known deputy-sheriff, Natt Garry."

It was indeed this notorious personage, who advanced into the midst of the Brothers, smiling and bowing.

"As to how we happen to be here," pursued Captain Harvester, "the story is soon told. That Dawson and the old hermit are very smart, but they didn't quite comprehend what money and friends will do, and we've given them something to think about. In a word, we've broken jail!"

Such was indeed the explanation of the presence of the three ruffians in the midst of the Pioneer Brothers.

Partly by bribery and partly by force they had recovered the liberty Captain Dawson had taken from them.

"And now that we are here," resumed Harvester, "it is needless to say that we mean business! Our one thought is to have a terrible revenge upon that old hermit and Captain Dawson!"

A buzz of joyous approval passed over the listening Pioneer Brothers.

"What we propose to do, and to do within an hour," pursued Harvester, "is to seize the hermit and his girl, with that meddling captain, and rush them all off in the direction of our settlement. Not only must we seize them, but also their gold, including the handsome pile which they have found since the opening of this camp, and which is doubtless buried at this moment under the floor of their cabin."

"Good! glorious!" exclaimed Moxley, giving expression to the general sentiments of the brotherhood. "All we need to be told is how this thing's to be done."

"I'll soon tell you, boys," returned Harvester, beckoning his followers nearer, and lowering his voice to a whisper. "You have only to listen!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TROUBLE FOR CAMPUS.

The horse to which Captain Dawson and Miss Camp had confided their destinies proved worthy of the trust they had reposed in him, and guided himself in the intense darkness far better than they would have been able to guide him, even if they had possessed an intimate knowledge of the route.

He not only traveled homeward at a rapid gait, but he stuck to his proper route, with a faithfulness which few men could have equaled and none could have surpassed.

The young couple were thus left at their leisure to talk of all the mysteries and problems of their situation.

The captain told Miss Camp all that he knew concerning his lost sister, and gave her an account of the efforts which had been made for her recovery, while she gave him a brief resume of her simple but pathetic history.

"The one great consolation of my life," she concluded, "has been the devotion of Mrs. Camp, who has now been dead a few weeks only. No mother could have been kinder than she has always been to me. In her younger days she was a teacher of music and all the branches of English, so that no one could have been better qualified than she was to give me a good education. Mr. Camp, too, has been to me a good father and friend."

one could be. The fact that they had no children of their own caused them to lavish all their affection on me."

"All this was certainly very fortunate for you," said the young officer, who could not help feeling very grateful to the worthy couple for having done so much for the maiden. "And how long have you known this wretched Campus?"

"Oh, almost from the hour of my adoption by the Camps," was the answer, "but it has been only for a couple of years that he has been endeavoring to pay me attention, and only a few weeks that his manner has been threatening and violent."

Occasionally, as they were thus exchanging their confidences, the captain would look back and listen, to satisfy himself that there were no indications of a pursuit by Campus.

At length they caught a glimpse of two or three lights in the Indian village at no great distance ahead of them, and the sight gave them both an intense joy and relief.

"You see that we are all right, Miss Camp," observed the young officer. "The horse has come as direct as he went. I think we had better drive first to the tent of your foster-father. He is not only in great distress about you, but he will be able to assist us in the solution of the great problems crowding upon us."

"As you see fit, captain," returned the maiden, with grateful fervor. "I place myself in your hands."

The couple had almost reached the spot where the captain had first seen the vehicle, and were proceeding at a walk, the route being rough and crooked, when the horse suddenly shied at some object beside it.

Ere it could leave the trail, however, it was seized by the bits in a vise-like grasp, and instantly brought to a halt.

At the same instant a powerful dark-lantern was turned upon the scene, and the captain saw that he was being held by three persons, who were easily recognized as the Brooker boys and their sister.

The latter held the lantern, and was abreast of the vehicle, on the right side.

Abe Brooker was opposite her, on the other side, while the other brother had the horse by the head.

"It's them, sure enough!" cried Emily, in a voice husky with rage, as she sprung forward and flashed her light over the couple in the vehicle. "Here is the girl!"

"You're right," returned Abe Brooker. "Here is Campus."

Captain Dawson comprehended.

The trio were mistaking him for Campus!

"The wretched liar and hypocrite!" cried Emily Brooker, as bitterly as furiously. "This time we'll finish him!"

The young officer comprehended his peril.

"Hold!" he cried. "I am not Campus, but Captain Dawson!"

An incredulous howl responded.

"Bring your light nearer," added the captain, hastily, as he began tearing off his disguise. "Don't you recognize my voice? I am really Dawson!"

The trio drew nearer, and when he had shoved up one of his sleeves a few inches, showing his white skin, they could do no less than accept his assurances and the evidences of their senses.

"True, you are Captain Dawson," acknowledged Emily Brooker, who had often seen him at the fort and elsewhere. "But how is it that we find you with Miss Camp, who has so long been missing?"

"I found her at the hut of Eidola, where she has been held a prisoner by the orders of Horatio Campus!"

A strange cry of wrath came from Emily, and was echoed by her brothers.

"It was Campus who caused her to be missing," explained Dawson, "he having captured her and carried her off to the hut in question."

"The villain!" cried Emily. "What was his purpose?"

"He wanted to force her to marry him."

Another howl of wrathful consternation came from the brothers and sister.

"And how did you get track of his baseness and treachery?" queried the young squaw, with forced calmness.

"Why, by disguising myself, as you see, and following him," explained the young officer, who now began to realize that he and Miss Camp had nothing to fear from these irate redskins.

"And you tracked him to Eidola's?" pursued Emily.

The captain assented.

"He drove there with this buggy?"

"He did."

"With what idea?"

"With the hope that he would terrorize Miss Camp into the acceptance of his suit, and that she would consent to be driven away to the fort, and from there go to one of our great Western cities and live happy ever afterward."

"But she refused?"

"In the strongest of terms, and then he resolved to kill her and sink her body in the lake. When she reminded him of his engagement to you, he said he 'hated the very sight of you' and that you were 'nothing but a squaw.'"

"Oh, the villain! But you were able to rescue Miss Camp uninjured from his clutches?"

"As you see."

The glances exchanged by the brothers and their sister were full of suppressed fury.

"Where is he now?"

The captain hesitated about informing the irate trio of the bound and helpless condition in which he had left Campus.

As bad as the redskin had been, the young officer was too generous to assist the jealous and furious Brookers to wreak their vengeance upon their perfidious associate.

"I left him near Eidola's," he answered.

"Dead, perhaps?" queried Abe Brooker, grimly.

"Oh, no. I didn't harm him!"

"Then you certainly left him bound hand and foot," declared Ally Brooker, "or you would not have been able to rescue Miss Camp and make your own escape. You must have carried him beyond the sight and hearing of Eidola, or she would have hurried to his relief, and he would have overtaken you long ago!"

The young officer remained silent, but he did not fail to remark with what crafty ability the redskin had divined the situation.

"Among the inducements offered you to marry him, Miss Camp," said Emily, turning to the rescued girl, "was anything said about money—or gold?"

"Oh, yes," was the answer. "He said if I would marry him, he would dig up the gold stolen from Wind River Clark, and go away with me to some great city and enjoy it!"

Another explosion of wrath succeeded, and the trio jabbered in their native tongue so furiously that even Captain Dawson could only form a general idea of what they were saying.

"You cannot state just where Campus is at this moment, captain?" was the query with which Emily Brooker at length turned to the young officer.

"Not with absolute certainty—no!"

"Then we shall have to go and look him up for ourselves," avowed Emily, with suppressed vengeance. "Of course you have no further use for the conveyance?"

The captain shook his head, at the same time springing out lightly and assisting Miss Camp to follow him.

"It's easy to finish our journey on foot," he added, resigning the reins to Emily, who lost no time in taking her place in the vehicle. "The lantern belongs to Campus, and I will leave you in possession of that also."

The two brothers hastened to place themselves beside their sister.

"We'll make things hot for that vile traitor!" announced Emily, in a voice of concentrated fury, as she started the horse and proceeded to turn him in the direction from which he had come. "Meanwhile, Captain Dawson, it is understood, I hope, that we have no quarrel with you or with Miss Camp?"

"Oh, perfectly."

The trio were soon flying out at a gallop in the direction of Eldola's, while the captain and the rescued girl, arm-in-arm, resumed progress toward the Indian camp.

"I forgot to say, captain," remarked Miss Camp, "that I know where the gold stolen from Wind River Clark is hidden!"

"You do? That is very important!"

"Campus asked me to go and see it," explained the rescued girl, "thinking the sight of it might tempt me to accept him, and I complied with his suggestion, in the hope that I should have a chance to escape during the journey. The step proved as vain for me as for him, however."

Captain Dawson expressed his thanks for the intelligence.

"We'll come back to this subject later," he added.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NEARING THE TRUTH.

As the couple neared the tent of Father Camp they remarked the gleam of a solitary candle through the canvas on the side nearest to them.

Within, at a sort of desk which was his pulpit, medicine-chest, and storehouse, sat the good missionary in an attitude of pain and dejection, which attested only too clearly how deep was his grief at the mysterious absence of his adopted daughter.

"Clearly enough," he exclaimed, as he gained his feet and began walking to and fro in the tent, as if swayed by an excitement too deep to allow him to remain motionless, "Horatio is lying to me, and has been a hypocrite and liar from the beginning. I begin to see that all my efforts to make a good and truthful man of him have failed. I believe he has carried Isabella off to some retreat in the hills, and he may have even murdered her! How shall I discover the truth? What measures can I take to wrest his secrets from him?"

A rush of light footsteps just without the tent at this moment gave him such a start that he was obliged to lean upon his desk for support.

The next instant Isabella led the way into his presence.

"Ah, thank God!" was his cry of welcome and relief, as he sprung forward, clasping his hand to his heart. "Heaven has heard my prayers! You live, darling Isabella, and have come back to me!"

"Yes, Papa Camp—with the aid of Captain Dawson," replied the rescued girl, as she nestled a moment in the arms opened to receive her. "Poor dear pap," and her glances scanned the dark lines on his face pityingly. "How you have suffered!"

"It's all ended now," returned the missionary, with streaming eyes, as he pressed the maiden to his heart with one hand, while he offered the other to the young officer. "And so you have been looking for her, my dear captain?"

"Or rather I have been conducted to her presence by what men call fate and what you term providence," declared the young officer, with smiling joy, as he shook warmly the hand offered him. "She has been a captive at Eldola's ever since the day when she vanished from sight!"

"A captive? And at Eldola's! How came she there?" asked the missionary.

"She was carried thither by Campus."

The clergyman seemed overwhelmed by this proof of the wickedness and duplicity of his adopted son.

"Give me the details," he enjoined, as he hastily advanced a chair for the use of the captain, inviting him by a gesture to be seated.

The story was soon told, as known to the reader, but not without many an exclamation and comment from the sympathetic hearer.

"I see, captain," he declared when all the facts were before him, "that it was a very great mistake to bring Isabella to the Reservation. What I should have done was to resign my charge here and remain with her in Wyoming City. With all due charity and consideration for the short-comings of such of my flock as Campus and the Brookers, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that all I have done here or attempted to do cannot reward me for these terrible afflictions."

"And yet I am not sorry that she came," returned Captain Dawson, with singular solemnity of manner, "and I think you will claim that there has been a higher wisdom than man's when I add that her presence here seems likely to result in her restoration to her kindred!"

The missionary was so startled by this declaration that he was unable to speak, and could only look his questioning astonishment.

"Yes, Father Camp," pursued the young officer, with a gladness that radiated from every lineament, "I have no doubt whatever, from facts which already reached me, that this dear girl is my sister!"

"Why, how can that be?" demanded the wondering missionary.

"I will soon show you."

The young captain hastened to give the facts concerning his lost sister, and at every word the look of delighted wonder upon the face of his hearer became more and more eloquent.

"Certainly, here are very striking indications of the truth of your convictions," acknowledged the missionary, after he had briefly weighed the captain's revelations and suggestions. "The resemblance of Isabella to your mother is certainly a very striking and important confirmation of your views, since it can hardly have been accidental. What are your own views on this very weighty matter, my dear child?"

"I fully share the convictions of the captain," replied Isabella, with glowing features, "that I am really the lost daughter of General and Mrs. Dawson!"

"Well, well, let us see if we cannot find some way of verifying the matter," proposed the missionary. "As you are aware, I still have the little frock in which you came to me, and Mrs. Dawson will not fail to recognize it at a glance if you are really her child. When shall we be able to secure the presence of your mother, captain?"

"In the course of to-morrow, sir. In the mean time, if you are willing, Isabella will go home with me and remain with my betrothed until the arrival of my mother, for whom I will instantly send a trusty messenger."

"Thanks, captain," returned Father Camp. "I am very glad you have thought of this arrangement, for I am really in no situation to guard her from Campus as you and your brave boys can. The truth of your theory or belief becomes more and more evident with every thought I give it, and I can do no less than place Isabella in your care until after your mother's arrival."

Eager and excited, the good missionary hastened to his desk, unlocking one of its compartments, and proceeded to make a hasty search in it.

"Yes, here's the precious frock of which I was speaking," he said, as he produced a small parcel which had evidently been wrapped up and sealed with the greatest care. "We will let your mother break these seals with her own hands. In the mean time, captain, I will go with you and Isabella to Mr. Clark's, and assure myself with my own eyes how safe and comfortable she will

be there until the weighty problem which has devolved upon us has been definitely decided."

Miss Camp and the captain expressed their pleasure at this proposition, and in another minute the trio were on their way to the hermit's.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MOTHER'S SECRET.

For some time after the departure of Captain Dawson in his Indian disguise, as related, the hermit and Nettie waited patiently for his return, discussing their plans for the future.

"It will be hard to leave that dear old cottage in the woods forever," at length remarked Nettie, after her father had spoken of the necessity of returning to a more settled and safe region.

"True, my child," returned the gold-finder, with a kindly smile, "but it would be harder still to undertake to live there, after the notoriety which has lately attached itself to my name. While you were still a little girl, and I had never found a grain of gold, we were comparatively safe in obscurity, but that day, has now gone by, and will never return."

"I realize all that as strongly as you do," avowed Nettie, "and I also feel how necessary it is for us to make our way to some place where we can enjoy the benefits of civilization. It is high time for you to be getting something more out of life than you have had for many a long year past, and I'm sure that Mrs. Dawson wouldn't like her son to endure longer the perils and privations which have been his portion since he entered the army."

"It is agreed, then, that we'll leave the camp, with the captain, bag and baggage, in the course of to-morrow," declared the hermit, with the air of summing up the whole discussion. "I must say, now that my thoughts have taken a turn in this direction, that I cannot leave these scenes a moment too soon."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the rapid approach of a horseman, and the couple had barely gained their feet in wondering expectancy when the new-comer dashed up to their presence, coming to a halt.

"Ah, Ebbitts, it's you?" recognized the hermit, stepping toward him. "I am glad to see you safely back again so soon. Is there anything new at the fort?"

"Yes, something that concerns you, and that's why I'm here before going to my claim," returned the new-comer, looking guardedly around and lowering his voice to a mere whisper. "In a word, those three awful villains you were so instrumental in jugging have broken jail and made good their escape."

"What! Harvester, Moonlight, and Garry?"

"Yes, all three of them!"

"Any particulars?"

"No, only that they bribed one of their keepers, and knocked another on the head, nearly killing him."

The hermit and his daughter exchanged glances of serious disquiet.

"Of course," suggested the maiden, nervously, "the villains will hasten to be revenged upon you and Captain Dawson, if there is the least chance for them."

"There can be no doubt of that," returned the hermit.

"They have certainly come in this direction," resumed Mr. Ebbitts, "and in proof of that fact I need only mention that your old house has been burned to the ground, with its contents, stables and all!"

The hermit and Nettie looked too shocked for utterance, so closely had this announcement followed upon the recognition of their peril.

"Of course, I cannot swear that the three jail-breakers are the incendiaries," added Mr. Ebbitts, "but it's only natural to put the two events together."

"And on just an instant," declared the hermit emphatically. "We need not doubt for a moment that the three men are coming this way, and that they have already entered upon their proposed revenge!"

"That's my view of the case, at any rate," avowed Mr. Ebbitts, as he gathered up his reins, "and I cannot too strongly urge upon you the necessity of being on your guard against them. With such a fine girl as that in your care," and he nodded to Nettie, with a fatherly smile, "you must remember that you're guarding something more precious than either gold or diamonds!"

After Mr. Ebbitts had ridden away, the father and daughter discussed their situation anew, in the light thus thrown upon it.

As time wore on, and Captain Dawson did not return, a keen sense of anxiety in regard to him gradually invaded the souls of Nettie and the hermit, it was so natural to ascribe the delay to some action or conspiracy on the part of the escaped prisoners.

"Nevertheless, as he was disguised as an Indian, and was going into the adjacent camp," at length observed the hermit, "it does not seem likely that he can have had any difficulty with these men. Let's try to be patient."

We need not pause upon the long and painful wait that succeeded.

Suffice it to say that the apprehensions of the father and daughter had begun to be very keen, when the voice of the young officer suddenly fell upon their hearing.

"Ah, there he comes at last," murmured Nettie, with a sense of relief we will not undertake to describe. "But who is that with him?"

The couple listened for a moment.

"That is Father Camp," then said the hermit, "and as there is a lady with them, I can only suppose that he has found his missing daughter."

The joy with which Nettie greeted her lover, while her father kindly welcomed the missionary, can be readily imagined.

"As to this young lady," said the young officer, as he took Isabella by the hand and drew her toward his betrothed, "her presence here is a very curious sequel to what I was saying to you and Mr. Clark the other day—and in fact almost every day since—in regard to my lost sister. In a word, I haven't a particle of doubt that she is my sister, and I want you to receive her as such until further advices."

How pleasant and sympathetic was Isabella's reception by Nettie after such a declaration need not be stated.

"I may add that she is now known as the adopted daughter of Father Camp," resumed the captain, "and that I have just rescued her from a situation of the most horrible anguish and peril."

He proceeded to sketch briefly the situation in question, and then added:

"Under these circumstances, Father Camp and I agree that her place is here until I can communicate with my mother, and I am sure, Nettie, you will be charmed and delighted with her."

"I do not doubt it," avowed Nettie smilingly, as she drew the new-comer to her heart, caressing her tenderly. "I shall be glad to know her for her own sake, even if your hope of claiming her as a sister should prove to be without foundation. Come in, Miss Camp—come in all. It's time to be getting in out of this chilly air."

The little party had scarcely entered the cabin, when the footsteps of a horse were heard approaching, soon coming to a halt at the entrance, and the handsome young orderly of the captain's company, Mr. Girder, looked in upon his superiors, with the announcement:

"Here's your mother, captain!"

The joyful surprise of all who heard these words need not be dwelt upon.

Bounding to the door, the captain gave his mother a cordial embrace, and then assisted her to the ground, conducting her into the dwelling.

"This is indeed a surprise, mother,"

he said, looking toward the girls, with the hermit, had slipped into the adjoining apartment. "What can have induced you to take such a sudden start?"

Mrs. Dawson halted abruptly, throwing back her veil, and turning an earnest, singular gaze upon her son.

"Alfred," she said, abruptly, and with extraordinary solemnity, "I have come here alone and unexpected because I am in the greatest anguish and unrest a mother heart can ever know. This very day I have learned that a certain Father Camp, who has long been a missionary among these Shoshones, has an adopted daughter, who is not only a waif from some Indian raid, but who bears the name of Isabella—"

She paused in wonder and surprise at the expression which came over the young officer's face.

"Sit down, mother," he said, with a singular smile, as his eyes grew moist, and his breath came rather hurriedly for a warrior of his reputation. "You are just in time! I, too, have been busy with this problem! I have seen Father Camp and also the girl in question!"

"Alfred! what is there in this wild hope?" cried Mrs. Dawson, as her features paled to the hue of marble.

"That is for you to say, mother," replied the young officer, as he gently forced Mrs. Dawson to sit down and sat down beside her. "Affairs are in such shape here that I was about to send for you. As I said, I have seen both Mr. Camp and his adopted daughter. He has saved the little frock in which she came to him from the hands of the red-skins who stole her, and it is for you to say whether you ever saw this frock before or not!"

As he spoke he picked up the parcel the missionary had brought with him, and which he had laid in a chair at the moment of the mother's arrival, and placed the same in the lady's lap.

She whitened to her very lips, as much perhaps from the emotion of her son as from contact with the parcel before her.

"Open it, mother," enjoined the young officer, his entire frame shaking with agitation, "and tell me if you have ever seen this little frock before to-day!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A JOYOUS RESTORATION!

Instead of complying with the young officer's injunction, Mrs. Dawson sat as if paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

What thoughts crowded upon her!

Was the long hope and dream of her lonely life to be realized?

Or was the precious faith and belief which had nerved her in so many sad hours about to turn to dust and ashes, and perish forever?

"Oh, Alfred!" she exclaimed, as she turned the parcel over and over in her hands, "what if this Isabella Camp should be my lost darling? What if she shouldn't? Who sealed this package?"

"Father Camp himself!"

"A long time ago?"

"Many years!"

"With the idea—"

"Yes, with the idea that this little frock, if thus carefully preserved, would some day, if it should fall into the hands of the mother who made it, be quite enough in itself to prove to her the identity of her child!"

Mrs. Dawson called all her forces to her aid.

"What if this hope should prove an illusion—like so many others?" she murmured.

"Why, we should only have to hope and search anew, as we have so often done before," replied the young captain.

"Ah! that is true!"

This suggestion seemed to give the mother more strength than all else, since it barred the way to despair.

"Do you remember the frock, mother," suddenly asked the young officer, "which was worn by Isabella on that fatal day?"

"Remember it? How can I ever forget it? Was it not burned in colors of

fire upon my brain? I made it with my own hands, and still have the pieces that were left from it!"

"What more do we want, mother?" demanded Captain Dawson. "Let's open the package immediately!"

"Yes, yes! Cut the string!"

The young officer complied with feverish impatience.

"And now open it!"

The hands of the strong, brave army officer trembled like those of a weak child as he obeyed this further order, and caught up the little garment thus revealed, holding it up to view.

One glance was enough for the long-sorrowing mother!

The cry she uttered was something that utterly defies description.

What a world of sorrow did it bury out of sight forever!

What a world of hope and joy did it invoke!

"Oh, Heaven!"

It was all she could say.

Mute, with clasped hands, and with her eyes raised in silent thanksgiving, her very attitude told the glad story!

"It is the same my sister wore, mother?"

"The very same!" answered Mrs. Dawson, with joyous sobs. "How well I remember its every feature! The buttons, the braid, the shape—I can close my eyes, Alfred, and describe it just as well as if I were looking at it. If you glance at the bottom of the skirt behind, you will find a place where a big dog we had—you must remember old Fido—tore it one day while playing!"

Captain Dawson turned the garment and soon found the spot indicated.

"Sure enough!" he exclaimed. "Here is the mend referred to!"

"And this good Father Camp!" cried Mrs. Dawson, suddenly rousing herself. "Where is he, Alfred?"

"He is in the adjoining room, where he has been listening to all we have said," replied the captain. "I will ask him to join us, as you will no doubt wish to hear from his own lips an account of his connection with this matter."

In response to the summons that succeeded, the missionary made his appearance, his eyes wet with tears, and his features quivering with emotion.

"I have heard all, and comprehend all, Mrs. Dawson," he said, as he shook hands warmly with her. "Let me tell you how your child and this frock came into my keeping."

He proceeded to set forth the substance of the history thus suggested.

He had remarked the presence of the child in a camp of wandering hostiles, and had at once realized that it could not belong to any member of the band.

Actuated by pity and a sense of duty, he had bargained for the stolen child, giving her captors a few beads, a pocket-knife or two, a pair of scissors, and some other articles of the kind for her.

"And she is still with you—still alive and well?" asked Mrs. Dawson, after the few simple particulars of the maiden's career had been given.

The missionary bowed.

"Bring her to me! Or else take me to her! I would see her as soon as possible!"

"You have only to be calm, mother," said the young captain. "She is not far distant! In fact, she is here!"

"Here!"

Mrs. Dawson was on her feet in an instant, her eyes turning eagerly toward the apartment from which the good missionary had come.

"I comprehend," she murmured. "My poor lost darling was here at the moment of my arrival! You have told her all, and she is prepared to see me—to come to me—to gladden the heart of her weary and long-suffering mother! Oh, Isabella! my darling!" she finished, with a wild sob, "come to me! come to me! never more to leave me!"

An answering sob came from the adjoining apartment, followed by a quick patter of footsteps, and then such a

vision of beauty and gladness burst upon the gaze of Mrs. Dawson that it seemed to take away her breath.

"Oh, Issy! my lost Issy!" burst from the mother's lips, as she tottered forward with outstretched arms. "It is indeed my own darling!"

And the next instant Isabella was sobbing convulsively on the bosom of her mother, whose tears of unutterable gladness rained upon her, while Nettie Clark glided to the arms of her lover, and found relief in a similar flood to her long pent-up feelings.

As to the hermit and Father Camp, they manifested their delight at the turn affairs had taken by an embrace that would have done credit to a pair of brothers reunited after long years of absence.

CHAPTER XL.

THE FOUR INTRUDERS.

When the little party had in a measure recovered their calmness and the principal facts of the situation had been discussed and comprehended, Mrs. Dawson turned to her daughter with a smile of admiration and said:

"While no further evidence can be desired by me or any one else to prove that you are really my lost Isabella, I may as well give an additional proof, which will be of the same certain and irrefutable character as those we have already considered. If you will bare your left arm you can show us, just below the elbow, a curious sort of mark, in the shape of a red spray, which appears to be the result of a fright I had in a thunderstorm several months before your birth."

Blushing and smiling, Isabella bared her lovely arm, exhibiting the mark in question, and it is needless to say how potent it was to remove any doubt which could have possibly been suggested to the witnesses of the joyous restoration of Isabella Dawson to her mother and brother.

"It seems from all this that we have a great deal to be thankful for," said Father Camp, with a mien between smiles and tears. "For my part, I shall never cease to be grateful that Heaven has been pleased to give me such an important share in these proceedings, and I am sure that Isabella will always have a great affection for her foster-father, whatever may be the warmth of love she bestows upon her dear mother."

"Oh, be sure, Papa Camp," cried Isabella, springing to her feet and embracing him, "that I shall never cease to be grateful for all you and Mrs. Camp have done for me. Had it not been for your thoughtfulness and devotion, the gladness of this hour might never have reached me."

At this moment there came a succession of sounds from a distant quarter of the camp which at once arrested the hermit's attention and caused him to walk to the door of his cabin and look in the direction from which these sounds had come.

"Those fellows are evidently having a quarrel, Mr. Camp," he said, as the missionary joined him, and both stepped outdoors. "I hear curses and shots—sounds of which I've scarcely had a hint before since I have been the captain of this camp."

Both continued to listen.

As was usual at that late hour, the camp had become dark and silent, nine-tenths of its occupants having turned in for the night.

"Can you see just where the disturbance is, Mr. Clark?" asked Father Camp, as Captain Dawson came out of the cabin, followed by his mother, sister, and betrothed.

"Not to a dead certainty," replied the hermit, "but I think it comes from a tent occupied by a man named Moxley, a sort of scoundrel of those Pioneer Brothers, who have crept into the camp

at one time and another in considerable numbers."

Another outbreak of voices and firearms at this moment deepened the interest and attention with which the little party looked in the direction of the disturbance.

"Ought you not to take a turn in that direction, Mr. Clark?" asked the missionary.

"Oh, I hardly think it will be necessary," replied the hermit.

"There is no danger to you or to the ladies from that source, I suppose?" pursued the clergyman.

"Not the least!"

"In that case, I think I will be getting back to my people," said Father Camp. "I wish to keep an eye on that adopted son of mine, and even on the Brookers. But I will look in upon you early in the morning."

He went away after a few pleasant and sympathetic words to each of the ladies, and was soon lost to view.

He had scarcely gone, when the uproar in the direction of the Moxley tent became louder than ever.

The hermit's brow darkened involuntarily.

"I can't have such conduct as this at such a late hour," he declared. "There are honest, sober toilers here who desire to sleep to-night, in order that they may be able to work to-morrow. I shall have to pay them a brief visit. You had better conduct the ladies into the house, captain, closing the doors, and await my return. I will be gone but a few moments."

At this suggestion the ladies entered the house, followed by the young officer, and the hermit then walked away in the direction from which those sounds of strife and violence were still coming.

Guided by an occasional gleam of light from the abodes he passed, he reached the tent of Moxley.

To his surprise, he found it as quiet as a graveyard, and lighted by a single dim lantern suspended from the ridge-pole.

"What's going on here, Moxley?" he asked, as he came to a halt just within the entrance.

"That fellow who has the Reefer claim has been making a nuisance of himself for the last hour or two, and has even fired several shots at me," replied Moxley, as he emerged from the rear of his tent, "but I've finally got rid of him, and his friends have given me an assurance that he shall not again intrude upon me!"

"And that's all there is of it?"

"That's all, sir."

"Don't you want any assistance?"

"No, thank you," replied Moxley. "It's not likely I shall have any further trouble with the blackguard—at least for to-night."

Expressing his satisfaction that the matter was no worse, the hermit turned on his heel, wishing Moxley good-night, and walked quietly back to his claim.

As he reached his cabin, he was surprised to see that it was enshrouded in total darkness.

In view of the lateness of the hour, however, he did not give the matter any particular thought, but quietly entered.

"All in the dark?" he queried, pleasantly, as he closed the door behind him.

The response was as terrible as unexpected.

A number of men suddenly arose to their feet around him, and at least two stout hands clutched him by the throat, choking him so that he was unable to utter the least cry for mercy or assistance.

In less than a minute he was thoroughly gagged and bound.

"That's the last of them we need bother with," said a voice, as the hermit was deposited roughly on the floor of the cabin. "We are in possession."

"And there's little likelihood that we shall be disturbed between now and morning," returned a second voice, which seemed almost familiar to the helpless hermit. "We are as well as a light."

seeing that both doors are locked and the windows are curtained."

"All right. Let's have it."

The hermit was lost in wonder at this situation of affairs, and for a moment asked himself if he were not the sport of some horrible illusion.

The scratching of a match succeeded, and then a faint ray of light began illuminating the darkness in which the gold-finder found himself.

With what eagerness he availed himself of it to look around can be imagined.

What he saw seemed more like a dis-tempered fancy of the imagination than like a reality.

Near him lay Captain Dawson, in the same fix as himself, and at the opposite side of the room sat the three ladies in three chairs, all bound and gagged, and staring in helpless terror at their surroundings.

But worse was to come!

Around the table which occupied the center of the apartment were seated four men, who were instantly recognized by the hermit as Jake Sherwood, Captain Harvester, Lieutenant Moonlight, and Natt Garry!

Imagine his horror at the sight!

CHAPTER XLI.

CONCLUSION.

The four men were as smiling and contented as demons.

"That was a good thought of yours, Garry, to call the hermit to Claim Eighty-three by that sham shooting and fighting," said Captain Harvester. "It helped to divide the enemy, and also attracted attention to that quarter, so that we had no difficulty in gaining this refuge unseen."

"Another thing," returned Garry "the moment that uproar called the attention of the ladies to the front, we of course had a chance to creep into the house by the rear door!"

This was indeed the way in which the intruders had effected their entrance.

"And once in," remarked Moonlight, "how easy it was to secure the ladies! As luck would have it, they all sauntered into the house singly, so that we didn't have the least trouble. That captain was a little more difficult to manage, but with four to one, and one of the four at his throat, he had to go under!"

"And now that we are here, we may as well get to work," remarked Jake Sherwood, a little impatiently. "It is now so late that we can make our escape unseen from the camp at any moment, and I would like to get hold of the hermit's gold and vanish!"

"Where do you suppose it is?" asked Harvester, thoughtfully.

"Where? Ten to one it's under the floor of this cabin!"

"Then let's get to work."

The men arose, with an eagerness like that of hungry wolves, and commenced their search for the gold which had so long dazzled their vision and which had so long eluded them.

"Is Griff on the watch?" at length asked Harvester.

"Yes, and so is Walsh," replied Garry.

"They'll be sure to notify us if there is any sign of trouble."

An hour was spent in tearing up the floor of the cabin, and in digging over the surface beneath it, but nothing was seen of any treasure.

"Can it be that the rascals have buried their finds outside of the camp?" asked Moonlight, as he paused in his labors, with a keen sense of discouragement.

"Or that they have been selling their gold from day to day through Hank Lippman?" suggested Garry.

"Or that they have been shipping it by other conveyances?" demanded Sherwood, as he gave up the search altogether.

"We certainly are not going to get rich by digging here," declared Harvester, with an air of keen disappoint-

ment, as he looked at a watch hanging over the mantle-piece. "We must get out of this, and carry the hermit and the captain away with us."

"And the ladies, too," amended Garry.

"The essential is this captain and his proposed father-in-law," remarked Lieutenant Moonlight. "I am bound to have ample revenge upon both of them for all they caused me to suffer!"

"Hark!" suddenly enjoined Harvester.

All listened.

"What is it?" at length asked Garry, as nothing was heard.

"I thought I detected footsteps near the house," explained Garry. "Listen!"

All complied with this injunction.

"Sure enough!" cried Harvester, with a look of alarm. "Some one is coming!"

A strange light flashed over the scene at this moment, seeming to run the circuit of the house.

"What's that?" asked Garry.

None of his associates answered.

All were too thoroughly alarmed.

"Hear those steps!" breathed Sherwood, with a sudden start. "We're surrounded!"

He sprung to the door and opened it, only to recoil with a yell of amazement.

"The whole camp has been aroused!" he cried. "There are at least a hundred men between us and freedom!"

It was only too true!

The four men bolted from the front door, but, at seeing the wall of leveled rifles before them, they all recoiled with cries of terror.

"We can at least be revenged upon our prisoners!" cried Garry.

Such was not the case, however.

A dozen men, headed by the orderly of Captain Dawson, had rushed in at the back door, and in less time than it takes to record the fact, the hermit and the young officer, as also the ladies, had been freed from their bonds and were in safety.

"And now surrender or die!" cried the orderly, as he led his immediate associates against the ruffians, thus taken between two fires. "The least delay or resistance, and we'll riddle you with bullets!"

The command was duly heeded, and in another minute the four outlaws were again in bondage, and destined to remain in it for many a long year to come.

* * * * *

The gold which Campus had stolen was duly found, under the guidance of Isabella Dawson, at the spot where the redskin had concealed it, and we need not pause to relate what good use was made of it by the hermit and his daughter.

That the Dawsons and Clarks were soon on their way "out of the wilderness," may be taken as an assured fact, but the step was not taken before Isabella Dawson had become deeply attached to the gallant young orderly who had come to the rescue at such an opportune moment, and the orderly and captain are now relations by marriage.

As to Nettie, she says she is the happiest bride in the world, and she certainly means it.

The camp of Pilot Mountain still has its eager gold-seekers, many of whom are doing fairly well, but none of them has yet repeated any of those wondrous strikes of Wind River Clark which first made the valley famous.

The hermit himself is living happily with his daughter and son-in-law, but he has had enough of solitude, and would not exchange the least exclamation of one of his grandchildren for all the silence which was once so dear to him.

As to Campus and the Brookers, nobody knows just how their strifes ended, but all of them have vanished from the Shoshone Reservation, where Father Camp is still busy in his noble calling.

THE END.

Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

BY OLL COOMES.

- 163 Kit Bandy in Texas; or, The Young Mustang.
422 Kit Bandy's Right Bower; or, Baby Sam, the Boy Giant.
444 Kit Bandy's Sweep; or, Little Buckskin, the Centaur.
473 Kit Bandy's Slick Scheme; or, Old Tom Rattler.
661 Kit Bandy's Deliverance; or, Banner Ben.
680 Kit Bandy's Pard; or, Dauntless Dan, the Freelance.
791 Kit Bandy Rattled; or, The Infant Giant.
795 Kit Bandy in Red Ruin; or, The Young Whirlwind.
799 Kit Bandy's Big Rustle; or, Saddle King Sam.
804 Kit Bandy's Brigade; or, Dan, the Mountain Guide.
927 Kit Bandy's Brigade in Arizona.
939 Kit Bandy's Star Engagement.
955 The Dandy Dead-Shot; or, Old Kit Bandy's Compromise.

- 153 Jack Drew, the Nemesis; or, Eagle Kit the Boy Demon.
182 Jack Drew's Drop; or, Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
202 Jack Drew in Deadwood; or, Prospect Pete.

- 5 Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew.
18 The Dumb Spy.
58 The Border King; or, The Secret Fox.
71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.
74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
143 Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
174 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy; or, Old Caleb Arbuckle.
300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
532 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.
652 Don Barry, the Plains Freelance.
670 Norway Nels, the Big Boy Mountaineer.
778 Highland Harry, the Wizard Rifleman.
823 Poker Jack, the Detective Sport.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
126 Playmate Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
152 Black Beas, Will Wildfire's Racer.
157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
262 The Young Sharps; or, Rollicking Mike's Hot Trail.
274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
403 Freddy Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
488 Wild Dick Racket; or, How He Fought for Honor.
501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
655 Plucky Paul, the Boy Speculator.
667 Bob and Sam, the Dandy Detectives.
709 The Curbstone Detective; or, Harry Hale's Big Beat.
757 Detective Frank's Sweep-stake.
869 Ned Norman, the Gambler Broker.
881 Turkey Billy, the Shine-'em-up Detective.
917 Flash Lightning, the Mountain Mascot.

BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 848 Dan, the River Sport; or, Foiling the Frisco Sharp.
892 Bowery Ben in Chinatown.
911 Bowery Bob, the East-side Detective.
952 The Circus Detective.
984 Scaler Sam, Detective; or, Hook and Ladder 6.

BY DAN DUNNING.

- 746 Outlet Jack, the Secret Service Spy.
767 Mac and Jack, the Invincibles; or, The Diabolical Three.
875 Detective Dave's Close Call.
884 Farrel Fox and His Girl Ferret.
893 Farrel Fox's Sweep-Stakes.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN.

- 629 Violet Vane, the Velvet Spy; or, The Jubilee of Jacktown.
663 Violet Vane's Victory; or, The Jasper City Clean Out.
693 Violet and Daisy, the Pooey Pards.
705 Violet Vane's Vow; or, The Crafty Detective's Craft.
724 Violet Vane's Vengeance; or, The Wipe-Out.
730 Violet Vane's Verdict; or, The Game at Coffin City.
741 Violet Vane, the Ventriloquist Victim; or, Sport vs. Sport.
750 Violet Vane, the Vanquished; or, The Life Struggle.
763 Violet Vane's Vision; or, The Fiery Hand of Fate.
489 The Diamond Sport; or, The Double Face of Red Rock.
519 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.
531 Daisy Ware, the Sport from Denver.
587 Old Bombshell, the Ranger Detective.
604 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire; or, Among the Vultures.
619 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.
641 Dismal Dave's Dandy Pard; or, The Clue to Capt. Claw.
651 Round Boy Frank, the Young Amateur Detective.
682 Wild Vulcan, the Lone-Range Rider.
714 Old Macey, the Man from Missouri.
774 Clear-Grit Cal, the Never Say-Die Detective.
789 Sam Sheridan, the Secret Service Special.
806 Cowboy Steve, the Ranch Mascot.
820 Nobby Nut, the Tenderfoot Detective.
836 Sharper Stoke's Double Deal.
857 Spotter Bob in New York.
866 Spotter Bob's Bowery Racket.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE.

- 44 Rattling Rube; or, The Nighthawks of Kentucky.
59 Old Hickory; or, Pandey Ellie's Scalp.
108 Daring Davy; or, The Trail of the Border Wolf.
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